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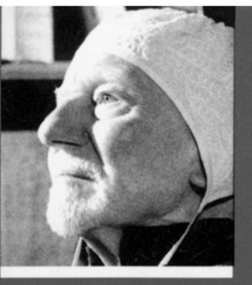

Volume 45
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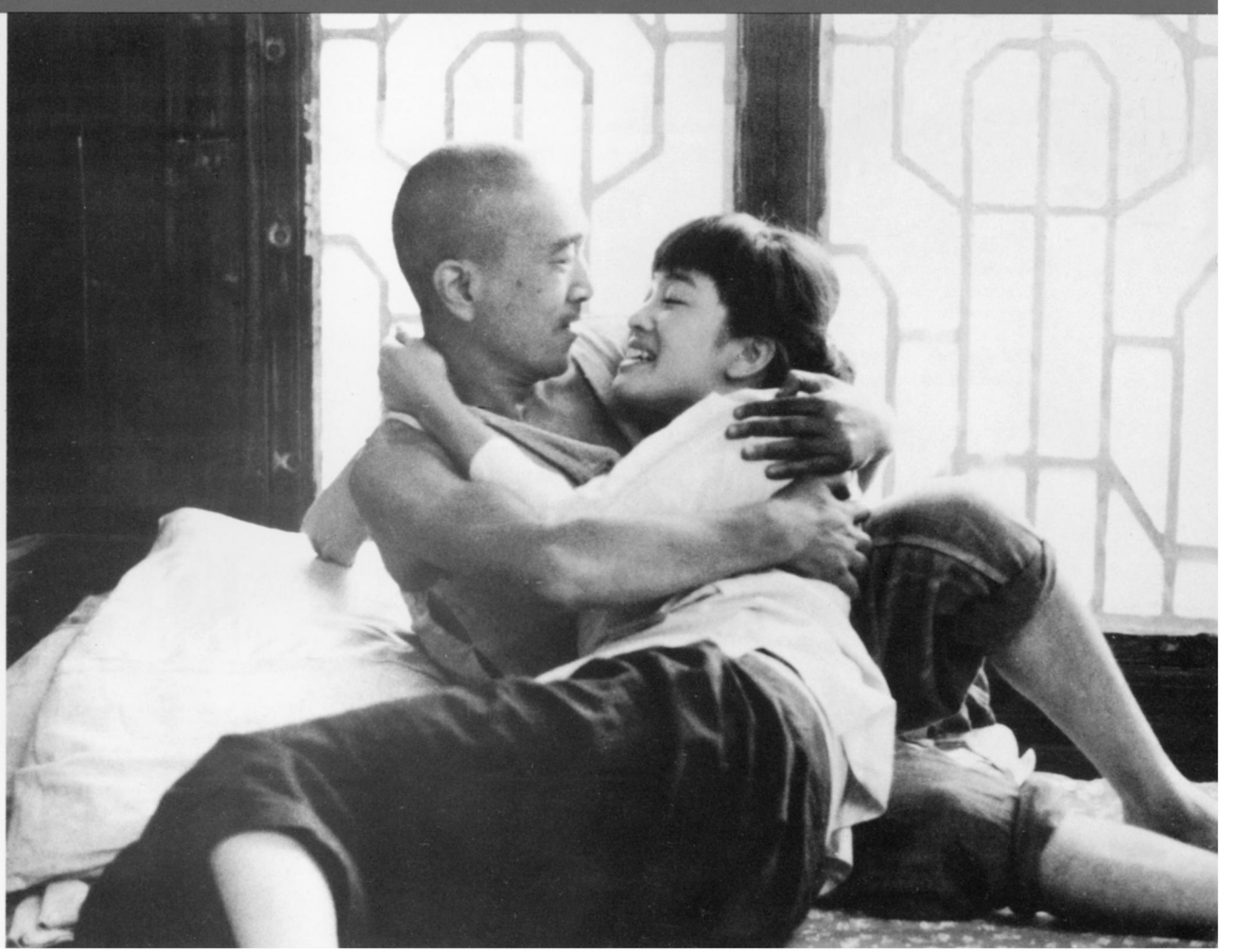

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Cover: (top) John Gielgud in *Prospero's Books* (see page 11); Li Baotian as Tienqing and Gong Li as Judou in Zhang Yimou's *Judou* (see page 2).

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Jenny Kwok Wah Lau

Judou—A Hermeneutical Reading of Cross-cultural Cinema

In 1988, China's open-door policy was at its peak. Director Zhang Yimou had just created a huge controversy over his film *Red Sorghum*. In mainland China, supportive viewers came out from cinemas mimicking the drunken palanquin carriers from the film and singing their indecent songs that worried the patrolling police. In various cities, security teams were called in especially for the movie screening.[1] The film caused a few officials in the China Film Bureau to raise their eyebrows, and outraged viewers accused the director of insulting the Chinese in order to please Westerners. (The film won the 1988 Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival.) It was *Red Sorghum*'s flouting of traditional sexual norms that elicited these responses. For a brief period, fan magazines and newspapers were full of discussions about the film —its plot, history, chauvinism, sex, violence, and so forth—but the director himself remained silent. No one would have guessed that two years later Zhang would turn out yet another project, *Judou*, that would be even more problematic than *Red Sorghum*.

Judou is a film that has generated tremendous international attention not only because of its merits (it was the winner of the Cannes Film Festival, the Chicago International Film Festival, and was nominated for the Foreign Language Oscar) but also because of the controversy it has aroused among Chinese film officials. The China Film Bureau, which serves, among other things, as a censoring committee for all films screened in mainland China, decided that the film was not good "for the image of China" and attempted to withdraw it from the Oscar nominations on the ground that it had not yet been commercially released in China. But the Academy Awards Committee argued that there had been a paying public, however small, for the film, presumably in Hong Kong.[2] The main Chinese audience for *Judou* was indeed the Hong Kong Chinese, who saw the film upon its release there in the winter of 1990. The response was lukewarm. Some mainland Chinese were able to see the tape of *Judou* when they visited Hong Kong. From the author's experience, the response of these mainland viewers was unfavorable. In the People's Republic of China itself, the film's audience has been confined to officials from the China Film Bureau, who, although they have failed to prevent *Judou* from being shown in the rest of the world, have to this day denied the film's primary audience, the mainland Chinese themselves, the opportunity of seeing it.

The fact that *Judou*, a film that has won admiration from its Western audience, has caused uneasiness among its Hong Kong Chinese viewers and has so totally antagonized mainland Chinese officials is a challenge to the interpretation of the film. Some in the West have speculated that the film was too sexually provocative for the authorities. Other Western critics, in seeing the film as a tragedy of feudalistic marriage, have assumed that the Chinese officials were offended by its metaphorical allusions to the present autocratic regime.

Gong Li as Judou in the dye factory

But a close study will reveal that neither the level of nudity nor the explicitness of sexual acts in the film was unprecedented on Chinese screens in the eighties. Furthermore, films that emphasize the oppressive nature of feudal institutions, including marriage, such as *A Good Woman* (1985) and *Widow Village* (1989), are favored by the socialist officials and welcomed by the public. In *Judou*, at least at first glance, adultery is not presented favorably. The couple is, or could be interpreted as being ultimately penalized by death and separation. In accord with Chinese didacticism it is then perplexing why the film could not be screened after some cuts, as was suggested at one point by the Film Bureau. Finally, some Western reviewers have tended to dismiss the case as yet another power showdown after the June 4th incident in Tiananmen Square, even though the production contract of the film was signed *after* June 4th.[3]

In a brief interview during the "Oscar controversy" Zhang commented that the reason Chinese officials find the film to be problematic is not so much because of the actual depiction of sex but because of the "somber" tone of that depiction.[4] This statement provides an interesting insight into the issue. One finds that the explicit erotic content of the film—beginning when Judou deliberately turns around to expose her naked body to the peeping Tienqing—is not derived from a simple act of narcissism. Indeed, her tired, dirty, and bruised body, together with the melancholy accompanying music, offers no "visual pleasure" for Tienqing or the film audience. Judou's turning around represents a decisive move against the gerontocratic and patriarchal rule that operates against her. And I propose that it is her implicit attack on this rule that has aroused the Chinese authorities' antagonism and the Chinese audience's unease.

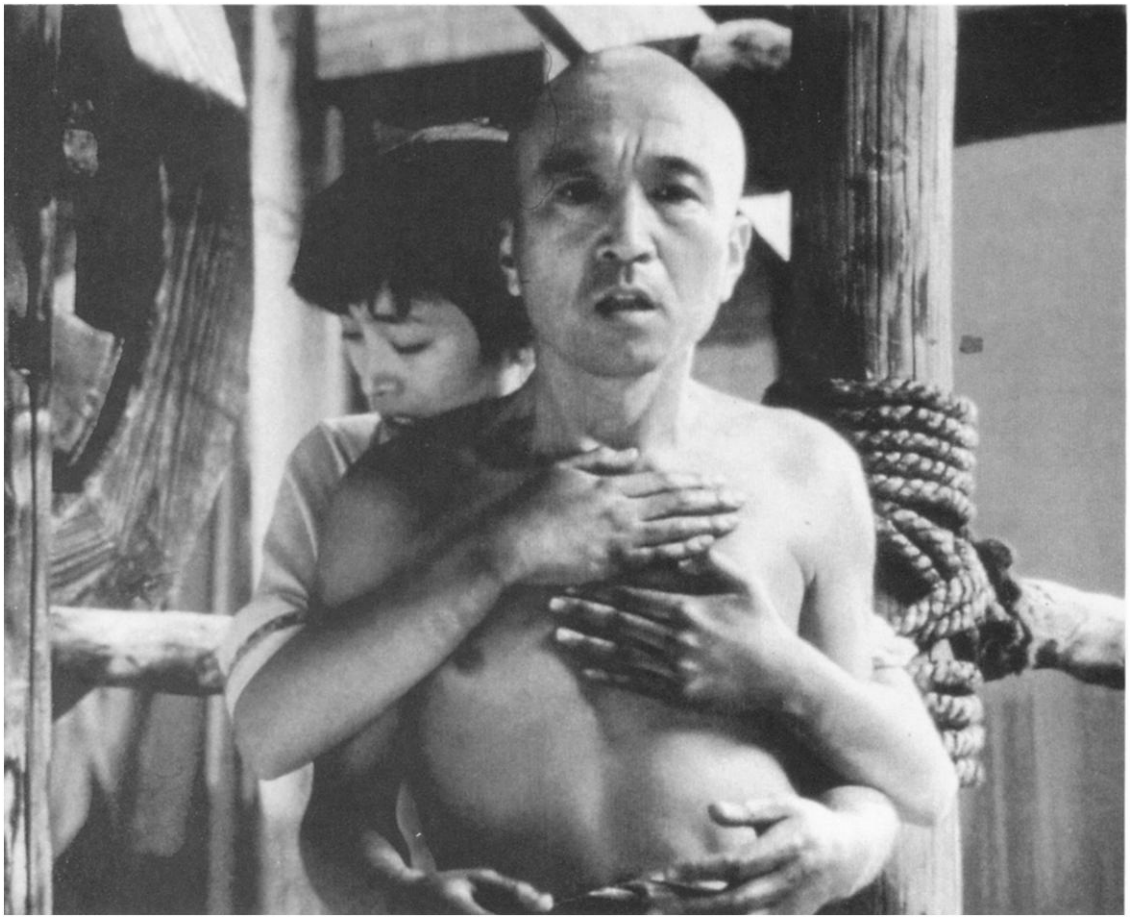
However, these different explanations of the meaning of the film expose the difficulties and errors that are often made in the cross-cultural reading of a text and call for a theory of reading

that can account for the wide divergence of opinion between audiences of the East and West. Brian Henderson has pointed out that "[critics] most often proceed by invoking or creating paradigms absent from a text in order to illuminate it."[5] My question here is how one can justify an extension of a paradigm onto a given text and claim validity. It is therefore important to clarify the question of methodology or interpretation before a solution can be proposed.

The comparative literature scholar Heh-hsiang Yuan, in his effort to bridge the study of the literature of the East and that of the West, has noticed some erroneous tendencies among comparativists which I find to be revelant to the field of Chinese film study.[6] He notes that an analyst heavily reliant on Western critical tools may impose already established Western models on Chinese film analysis. The comparativist may also find or draw attention to different types of formal or content expressions that superficially resemble those of the West while ignoring the cultural and philosophical conditioning of these forms and their meaning. And finally, a scholar, demonstrating a kind of cultural chauvinism, may simply rule out the possibility of any comparison that is appropriate to the study of films in both China and the West. While these practices may create instant gratification of some kind, they hardly lead to any genuine understanding of a different culture or its cinema.

My starting point is to take a film as a text. But contrary to the structural notion that the text is autonomous and may generate ahistorical readings, I follow the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur in maintaining that a text is an inscription of a discourse in which both meaning and intersubjective exchange take place. That is, a text has a double world. As an inscription, the text has a "world of its own" that can be analyzed structurally or semiotically. As a discourse, there is the meaning of an experience being transferred from one sphere of life to another. The text, as a dialectic of the two, can be analyzed not only semiotically for structure but also semantically for meaning that transcends the text itself and points toward a vision of the world.[7] Interpretation is a dialectic between the semiotic sphere, which explains what is said, and the semantic sphere, which appropriates the world projected by the text.

But even when one is working purely within the sphere of structural explanation one still has to select constitutive units, segments, and antinomies that have existential bearing to ensure that the text has meaning as a narrative of significance. For the reading of a film such as *Judou*, which explicitly portrays a sexual relationship, understanding



The secret embrace: Li Baotian (Tienqing) and Gong Li

the Chinese concept of sexuality becomes essential. According to Chinese scholars such as Sun Longji, the idea of "Yin" (excessive sexual feeling or action) and "Zhen" (female sexual purity, the opposite of Yin) is vital for understanding the Chinese approach to the subject.[8] In traditional Chinese thought, the Confucian Code of "Li gie," an ethic structured around the notions of "Zhong" (loyalty to one's country), "Zhen" (loyalty to one's husband), and "Xie" (filial piety), forms a major foundation for human relationships.[9] In observing these disciplines a good Chinese exhibits the quality of "Li" (propriety) and "Qing" (consideration for others).[10] In this essay, I argue that the antinomy of Yin and Xie, which is nonexistent in Western criticism, is the cornerstone according to which the story and meaning of *Judou* are structured. However, the sources from which these elements are selected are extratextual and, in fact, mostly cultural. It is therefore an understanding of Chinese culture and not merely its politics that is necessary in order to comprehend the power of the film to entertain/persuade/agitate its audience.

The film is a story of doomed lovers in rural China in the nineteen-twenties. A young woman (Judou) is purchased by and married to a sadistic old man (Ginshan) who desperately wants a heir. The old man has an adopted son (Tienqing), whom he enslaves in his dye factory. Soon Judou and Tienqing fall in love, and Judou becomes pregnant with a child (Tienbai). The old man is overjoyed with what he assumes is his ancestral blessing.

The secret affair between Judou and Tienqing continues until one day Ginshan is partially paralysed by a stroke. He subsequently learns of the affair and discovers that Tienbai is not his own child. Enraged, he tries to kill the couple and the child. Then, one day, while playing with the child, he accidentally drowns. His disappearance leads to gossip among the townspeople about the relationship between Judou and Tienqing. And as Tienbai grows into a teenager he turns against his adulterous parents and finally kills his father. Judou, in despair, burns down the dye factory.

Western assumptions about Chinese reactions (both official and popular) to this story are based on Western readings of Chinese attitudes toward sex and politics. But I am going to show that it is not so much as a political metaphor that the film is problematic (or else all other feudalistic marriage films are politically problematic), nor as an illicit morality play. Instead, it is because of its "Chinese quality"—its unique use of Chinese symbols, its challenge to basic Chinese beliefs, and the shrewdness of its argument based on Chinese logic —that the film is able to criticize Chinese culture harshly enough to cut deeply into the psyche of many Chinese.

淫

Yin, as a Gesture of Self-liberation

"The biggest Sin of all sins is Yin and the greatest Virtue of all virtues is Xie" is a folk saying familiar to most Chinese. It is this notion that defines what it means to be "human" and it is the notion under scrutiny in *Judou*. As a context for such an interpretation, one can look at *Fu-hsi Fu-hsi*, the contemporary novel on which the film is based.[11]

Fu-hsi is one of China's earliest and most important mythic deities. His marriage with Nu-kuo generates the universe and the human race from a formless mass. They are brother and sister, the Yin and the Yang, the separate and the inseparable. The incestuous marriage of Fu-hsi and Nu-kuo, about which they initially feel morally uncertain, is actually blessed with offspring, always a sign of heavenly approval. To juxtapose Fu-hsi with Judou already reflects a concern with the moral issue of Yin. Judou's union with Tienqing carries an incestuous overtone as well, although Tienqing is, in fact, not the biological son of Ginshan or the brother of Judou. Their relationship, like Fu-hsi's, is also blessed by heaven. The parallel of the "marriage" of Judou and Tienqing with that of the deities suggests that the former is morally correct. Fu-hsi's innocent marriage occurs in the archaic period, when civilization has not begun and artificial rules do not yet exist. Simi-

larly, in the case of Judou, a natural act becomes a sin only after the establishment of human-made rules.

The arguments presented in the film pivot around the contradiction between nature and human-made structures and the dialectic between a system and human beings, a system that controls and at the same time is controlled by humans. The issue of human-made structures is visually symbolized in the film by the very act of dyeing, an activity that is commonly found in some parts of China. The story takes place in a dye factory. Dyeing is an artificial imposition of color on what is natural. Dyeing is possible only if structures, machines, or apparatus are built.[12] The extreme close-up shots of different parts of the machine, its arms, wheels, etc., ensure that we recognize its dominance. Highly stylized, heavily sidelit shots reveal the wooden texture that elicits a sense of heaviness and clumsiness. The wide shots of the machine show its different parts coordinated in such a way that their movements are totally predictable and monotonous.

The machine, monstrous as it may seem, is closely but also dialectically related to human beings. Within the factory, workers and animals labor together under the same apparatus. The gigantic structure occupies the foreground while the humans in the background are small figures who have to adjust their movements to the functioning of the mechanical object. Huge pieces of cloth are hung in a systematic way, illustrating structure and order. But this apparatus, which produces beautiful fabrics and feeds the humans who work around it, is also threatening. Low-angle shots of hanging cloths look like Chinese funeral couplets, a symbol of death.[13]

On the other hand, the machine that, as a product of human endeavor, is powerful and structurally complex is also highly vulnerable. For the whole structure relies on a simple block and notch mechanism (repeatedly shown in several close-up shots) whose removal can result in the collapse of the whole operation.

Despite the power of the system, the life force cannot be permanently blocked off. The medium low-angle close-up shots of Judou with a strong back light coming from the bright sky portray her as a woman of vitality. Her natural beauty contrasts with the artificiality of her environment,

Judou as victim

which her marriage epitomizes. It is natural that Judou repels the old man who sexually tortures her. And it is natural that she is attracted to the young man who cares about her. Yet her emotional affinity is unacceptable to society. The common Chinese term used to describe Judou's sexual behavior is Yin, which has a negative moralistic connotation under the Confucian institution of marriage.

Yin is the original word for active lovemaking, sexual feeling, or erotic activity. The character has a meaning of "an uncontrollable/excessive (flow of) torrent of water." The film uses this character almost literally. When Judou and Tienqing make love for the first time by the dye vat, the whole structure of human architecture collapses as Judou accidentally kicks off the guarding notch of the dye machine. The endless piece of cloth that flows down like water is impossible to stop. Yin is as inevitable as an object falling under the force of gravity.

Contrary to the opinions of those who hold that Judou is a story about "lust," or "taint," the film itself does not make any moral judgment here. Visually speaking, the unravelling of the long bolt of red fabric even celebrates Judou's ecstasy, although the somber flute solo which fades up

slowly at the end of the scene reveals yet another level of comment—that this natural act is a tragic one.

The correlation between innocence/guilt and the man-made system is symbolically dealt with again a few scenes later when Judou's child is born and the village elders, following a Chinese tradition, gather to give the newborn a name. After a long search in the family book of names—another aspect of an artificial system—Judou's son is named Tienbai. The irony is that the elders choose the name Tienbai because of the connection between this name and his "brother's" name, Tienqing: the two names placed together form the idiom "qing-bai," which means "innocent from any guilt." "Tien" (heaven) connotes an anthropocosmic relation, which again directs one to the archaic story of Fu-hsi. This allusion to the Chinese vision of cosmogony provides the background from which the film criticizes the Confucian patriarchal and gerontocratic society.

孝

Xie, as Root of Oppression

The naming tradition, which defines relationships and hence power, is sharply and critically examined in the film. Under the designation husband/wife/son are contained major pairs of antinomies: powerfulness/powerlessness, harshness/placidity, inflicting/caring, oppressor/oppressed, fertility/aridity, and public/private. Power ostensibly resides in the position of husband. However, these relations between characters reverse themselves at two distinct points—first, when Ginshan, the "father," loses power after his stroke and second, when his "fatherhood" is reestablished through Tienbai's practice of Xie. The double reversal pushes the narrative to close almost at its original equilibrium—except for the last shot, which, by destabilizing the closure, brings the film to a tragic conclusion.

In the beginning it is Judou and Tienqing who are the placid, the powerless, the oppressed, and at the same time the caring and the generative, the ones who respond directly, simply, and naturally to the human instinct of sexual attraction, while Ginshan represents the other end of the spectrum. Even his sexual relation with Judou is public, for the latter's screaming, which is heard during the wide shots of the empty courtyard, connects the private space with the public one.

But the whole relation undergoes a 180-degree reversal after the old man is immobilized. Assuming that little harm can come from their oppressor, the young couple openly defy his surveillance and place him in a powerless and oppressed position. His inability to speak confines him to his private world of anguish and bitterness, while the couple's flirtatious laughter floats out from their room. In this stage even the husband/wife/son relationship is reversed, with Judou and Tienqing becoming the couple and the old man, who now has to be fed, bathed, and carried around, turning into their "son."

But this momentary liberation due to the fall of the "father" is very precarious or even dangerous. (When Ginshan first attempts to kill the baby the flute solo is replaced by the diegetic sound of thunder and rainstorm. During the other two attempts the Chinese gong, a nondiegetic sound effect, creates a sense of suspense and horror.) Since Tienqing is unable to make his relation with Judou public and is psychologically incapable of disobeying the principle of Xie, which bonds him to Ginshan, the struggle between the young couple and the system is antagonizing and neverending. It is reflected in their battle with Ginshan, and later with Tienbai, whose maturing consciousness becomes a psychological time bomb.

The relationship of the three characters is reversed again when Tienbai first learns to call the old man "Ba" ("daddy"). Ginshan immediately seizes on the natural innocence of the child and uses it as a tool for revenge, declaring in front of the child that he himself is the father, Judou the mother, and Tienqing the brother. Ginshan reestablishes the former relationship of husband/wife/son and reverses the relation of the oppressed/oppressor, powerless/powerful.

It is interesting to see how a world is defined with a single utterance of a child. This practice

becomes possible in a male-made symbolic world that embodies the ideology of Zhen (sexual purity) and Xie (filial piety). According to the logic of Zhen, Judou's sexual relation with Ginshan is the only legitimate one and her relationship with Tienqing is denied. Xie, for its part, ensures that it is Tienbai's duty as a son to recognize and give allegiance to his "proper" father, Ginshan. This symbolic system is in fact creating reality by determining what Judou can or cannot do.

Under the patriarchal system men continue to inflict pain upon women. The wide shot of the courtyard reappears. One hears the familiar screaming of Judou. A somehow abusive sexual activity begins again, but this time it is with Tienqing. The latter's patriarchal identification puts him in the oppressor position, in which he participates through slavish regard for the rule of piety. Patriarchal identification prevents him from seeking any solution for Judou that would violate his Xie toward Ginshan. He feels obliged to save Ginshan in various critical moments when in fact he could have harmed him in order to help Judou. His identification becomes abundantly clear when he slaps Judou because she criticizes his lack of reflection in adhering to the norm of filial piety. Judou responds to the violence with a sharp recognition that in this circle of oppression she is always the victim. As she heartbrokenly says, "Now you are beating me too. Revive the old man and you can both beat me!"

The man-made system dominates by suppressing nature. While in the first part of the film Judou gives birth to a child despite the impotence of Ginshan, the second part, although she has now gained some room for herself because of the old man's stroke, depicts the loss of her childbearing option. And although Ginshan cannot biologically have a son, he is, by manipulation, slowly "creating" a "son." For it turns out that Tienbai is emotionally linked to him, while Tienqing and Judou, though biologically capable, do not dare produce any offspring because of social pressure.

The question of Xie depicts the complexity of the father-son relationship. In the beginning the "son," Tienqing, engages in a sexual relation with his "mother" and on various occasions talks about killing his "father." This, however, is not to be confused with the Western Oedipal narrative, although later in the film Ginshan is drowned in front of his "son" Tienbai and Tienbai kills his father Tienqing. Looking at these relations in more detail, one notes that Tienqing is unable to harm Ginshan, who is anyway not his biological father. (Ginshan, in trying to kill his "son" Tienqing, ends up accidentally drowning himself.)

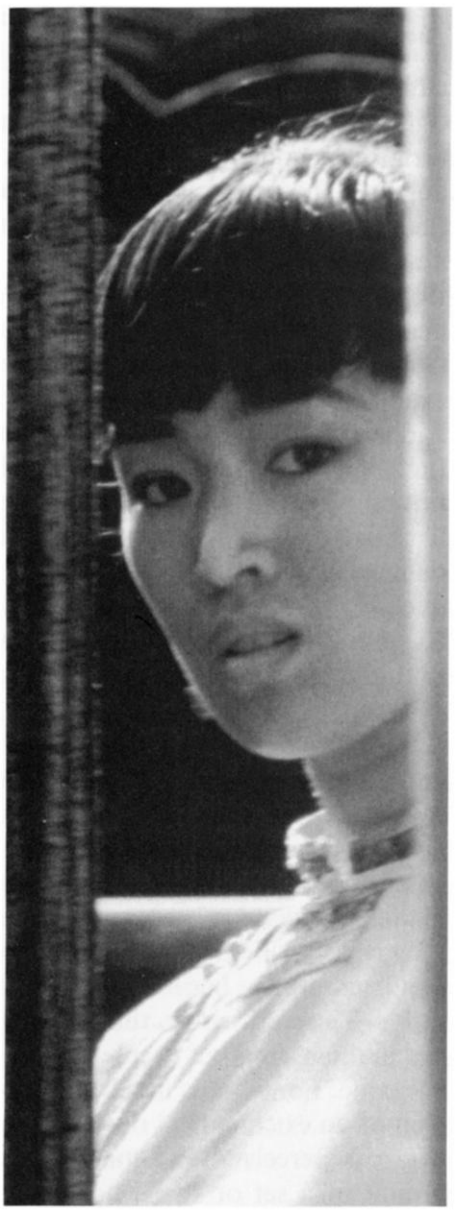
When he murders Tienqing, Tienbai has already irrevocably identified himself as the "son" of the old man. The identification, dramatically portrayed in the highly stylized funeral shots shown earlier in the film in which Tienbai sits on top of Ginshan's coffin, also constitutes a reincarnation ritual. Tienbai is now the *father*—or at least the surrogate father—who kills the *son*, Tienqing. Structurally speaking, the plot parallels what has been termed in Chinese mythology studies the Chinese "Inverse Oedipus complex," in which the father kills the son.[14] The theme is quite consistent with a tradition built on Xie.

The power of gerontocratic rule asserts itself through a symbol that does not require the actual presence of the old man to enforce it. The funeral ritual of "blocking the coffin," in which Judou and Tienqing, as widow and adult son of Ginshan, have to try to stop the latter's funeral procession by rolling under it forty-nine times, is a dramatized declaration of the superiority of the dead. The scene is composed of a montage sequence of repeated close-up low-angle shots with the coffin, the carrier of gerontocratic power, as the dominating force to which the couple has to submit. (The shot repetition reminds one of the Eisensteinian strategy of using repeated close-up shots of repeated actions for extradiegetic commentary.)

A woman's struggle against both gerontocratic and patriarchal power is futile. Her destiny is ultimately determined by the male, whether or not he hates, loves, or "honors" her (being Xie toward her). Judou is tortured by the three males in her life—her husband, her lover, and her son—who, by taking up the various roles in a patriarchal system, end up destroying her. As long as the woman is left out of the circulation of power she has no exit. Even the suicidal act in the last shot, in which Judou takes a torch and burns down the factory, is in fact a fulfillment of what the old man wanted to do in one of his murder attempts.

Although one may be tempted to summarize *Judou* as consisting of two strands of narrative: romantic admiration-confession-consummation-

The funeral procession



No exit

persecution-separation—the story of unfulfilled love; and sadism-retribution-counterretribution—the story of jealousy, it is noticeable from the above discussion that the structure of the text follows no simple linear form. This periodicity of narrative structure corresponds to a Chinese rhetorical device, one that, as Chinese literature scholar Andrew Plaks has observed, uses dichotomies not as a mechanistic alteration but as a process of constant flux. Here, the narrative ends at the same place it began, with the relation of oppressed/oppressor remaining unchanged. But the narrative has also described a life which experiences the ever-changing roles and characteristics of the powerful/ powerless, harsh/placid, inflicting/caring, fertile/arid, that define each cycle. By keeping the character Judou within the system and providing a tragic ending (unlike the woman character in, say, *Old Well*, who finally leaves her village) the film refuses to use any logic alien to the Chinese culture and forces one to recognize the limitations of a social system.

Let me return to my original question of why it is that *Judou* is so offensive to both Chinese authorities and audiences even when it so incisively criticizes the feudal rule. Once again, one must turn to the underlying cultural substructure for an answer. The person who proves the absurdity of the system is not a heroine according to the Chinese model. Unlike protagonists in "acceptable" films, who fulfill the Confucian requirement for being a "good" Chinese, such as the heroine in *Good Woman*, who gains group recognition and exhibits Qing (considerateness) and Li (propriety), Judou is far from satisfying these conditions. Like the protagonist in *Red Sorghum*, Judou violates not only the institution of marriage but the basic Confucian Code of Li gie, which defines the fundamental being of a traditional Chinese. Consequently, it is highly uncomfortable, to say the least, for the audience to see someone who according to their model is a "sinner" proving the system to be wrong.

Judou, as a simple story about a love affair, could be easily seen as a melodrama well crafted by its talented director. The audience may accept Judou's affair as being a normal/obvious outcome of an abnormal marriage. While sympathizing with Judou as a victim of her environment, the audience may either criticize her society as being unfair or feel frustrated at her inability to fight for her own rights. These criticisms, though not unfounded, do not in themselves cut deeply into the complexity of the issue. For what is involved is not only a depiction of an extramarital relationship, but how this affair is perceived and managed under the constraint of a set of social norms. It is, therefore, necessary to understand these rules in order to realize the fundamental problem in the shaping of the life of the protagonist. By reading the film against its cultural context one can discover the true nature of the conflicts and open up the subversive and culturally radical text.

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1. *Red Sorghum* created such emotional response in China that the press called it the "*Red Sorghum* phenomenon." The vehement reactions in some circles can be found in the lively discussions in *Dazhong dianying (Popular Cinema)*, 1988, nos. 5 and 6.
2. For a report of the "Oscar controversy" see *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), March 26, 1991.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Brian Henderson, "Notes on Set Design and Cinema," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 26.
6. Heh-hsiang Yuan, "East-West Comparative Literature: An Inquiry Into Possibilities," in *Chinese-Western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy*, ed. John Deeney (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1980), pp. 1–24.
7. For an outline of Ricoeur's position consult Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). For a more comprehensive understanding, see Ricoeur's *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays on Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), and *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).
8. Longji Sun, *Zhongguo wenhua te shen zeng jje gou (The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture)* (Hong Kong: Yishen Chubanshe, 1983). Also consult *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China*, by Wollfram Eberhard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
9. Strictly speaking, the Confucian Code that structures the Chinese moral system is that of Zhong and Xie. However, Zhong, understood as "loyalty to the emperor," did not apply to women in the past, since they were not allowed to hold public office. Instead, the female rule is Zhen, which means "sexual purity." Under the feudalistic system, Zhen basically applies to females only and sexual purity for married women implies "loyalty toward one's husband."
10. For more discussion see my article "Towards a Cultural Understanding of Cinema," *Wide Angle* 11 (1989), pp. 42–49.
11. The novel *Fu-hsi Fu-hsi* is written by Liu Heng. In *Zhongguo xiaoshuo-1988 (Chinese Novel-1988)*, ed. Wang Ziping and Li Tuo (Hong Kong: Sanlian Chubanshe, 1989) p. 80–171. The title of the novel draws on the name of a well-known and ancient Chinese mythical god. But the narrative of the novel does not follow the mythological story.
12. It is interesting to notice that the Althusserian notion of apparatus as a structure or institution for the perpetuation of a ruling ideology which supports the existing mode of life is used in a most literal and visual sense in this film.
13. Carried throughout the funeral ceremony, Chinese funeral couplets are long pieces of cloth on which poetic couplets are written to memorialize the deceased.
14. A lengthy discussion can be found in *Cong bigie shenhau dau wenshir (From Comparative Mythology to Literature)*, ed. Ku Tim-hsuang and Chen Wei-hua (Taiwan: Tung Tai Publisher, 1984).

Marlene Rodgers

Prospero's Books—Word and Spectacle

An Interview with Peter Greenaway

> Many years ago I wrote a script called "Jonson and Jones," about the relationship of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones in making masques for the Jacobean court. I suppose they made something like thirty masques in a period of fifteen years, but apparently all the time they were quarrelling. They were professionally—and in their private lives—very antagonistic and jealous of one another. But I think over and above these niceties, basically Ben Jonson was interested in the word, and Inigo Jones was interested in spectacle. And there's a way they had to fashion their two opposing interests to make a coherent whole, in order to present their masques. And in a way that is also the quandary of cinema . . . it's very interesting to try to find a filmmaker who can bring the word and the spectacle together.
>
> —Peter Greenaway

Very evidently, Greenaway himself is this film-maker. The marriage of word and spectacle informs every moment of his latest film, *Prospero's Books*. Greenaway's sixth feature is operatic in its use of music, song, dance, and the choreography of scores of extras. Against opulent settings of Renaissance architecture, naked spirits form tableaux based on classical mythology or Western art. The spectacle is further enhanced by the density of the images. Greenaway uses both conventional film techniques and the resources of high-definition television to layer image upon image, superimposing or opening out a second or third frame within his frame. At the same time, the film is highly literary and self-referential in its constant reminders that *The Tempest* is text: Greenaway conceives the play as Prospero's own creation, and we see the pen of the magician-playwright as it moves across the parchment, leaving baroque, calligraphic lines of the text in its wake.

Language and text are further emphasized by the authoritative voice of Sir John Gielgud—as Prospero, author of the play, he speaks all the dialogue until the final act. The magical force of his words conjures his characters before our eyes in elaborate dumb shows, played out in long extended takes. Only when Prospero forgives his enemies, realizing that "The rarer action is/In virtue than in vengeance," do the characters he has created come alive and speak in their own voices.

Perhaps Greenaway's most imaginative strategy in adapting *The Tempest* is his use of Shakespeare's brief mention of Prospero's magical books. Greenaway creates fantastical volumes that encompass the vast knowledge Prospero required to create his island utopia. The twenty-four books, which punctuate and structure the narrative, include anatomy texts with organs that throb and bleed and architectural texts with buildings that spring out, fully formed.

The realization of *Prospero's Books* has not exhausted Greenaway's creative engagement with *The Tempest*. He is publishing a collection of images from the film under the title *Ex Libris Prospero* as well as a novel, *Prospero's Creatures*. Additionally, he is writing a play called *Miranda*, which forefronts Prospero's daughter as the characters of *The Tempest* journey back to Milan.

Greenaway was in Toronto for the Festival of Festivals and I spoke to him about *Prospero's Books* and his very evident interest in the seventeenth century. Greenaway's latest film is now the third to bear a relation to that period. His first feature, *The Draughtsman's Contract*, is set in the Restoration, in 1692; *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* is strongly influenced by Jacobean revenge tragedy, particularly John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*; and *Prospero's Books* is set in 1611—the year that Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*.

Interview

PETER GREENAWAY: For some reason, the seventeenth century is an extraordinary period, it's a transitional period—you must remember that the Renaissance came to England very late. So by the time the High Renaissance had run its course in Italy, we were only just beginning our sense of Renaissance. Sometimes it's curious to imagine Shakespeare as an equivalent figure to somebody like Michelangelo; it's strange to think that they are both figures of the Renaissance but that they are posited in completely different worlds. I always think of the Jacobeans as being much more Renaissance-conscious than Shakespeare—although the first Renaissance influence in England came in the reign of Henry VII. There was a man called Torrigiano who created the tomb for Henry VII, so that was the first evidence of the Renaissance spirit in northern Europe.

There is a way that late Shakespearean drama has certainly excited and been a profound influence on a lot of my cinema for a long time, but I think that *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* has somehow been responsible for my interest in both the beginning of the seventeenth century and the end. I saw a production of that play when I was an adolescent and probably very impressionable, and I was immediately taken with all its themes and ideas—its violence towards women, its concerns with examining very dangerous taboo areas like voluntary incest, its gestures that are almost too melodramatic to be true, like the cutting out of the heart, and so on. Jacobean drama basically has to do with translations of Seneca coming through France and the Low Countries to influence English drama. There is an alternative tradition, that starts with Seneca and goes on through Jacobean drama to be picked up later by people like de Sade, and then much later by people like Genet, Bataille, and it even continues with Ionesco's Theatre of Cruelty and Peter Brook's Theatre of Blood, and perhaps it is also picked up by filmmakers like Buñuel and Pasolini. So I'm fascinated by an alternative examination of cultures, which I suppose basically examines the center of the human predicament by going to the edges, to the extremes, to see in fact how far one can stretch the examination of various forms of aberrant behavior. It's obviously a tradition that I'm interested in, as exemplified by the extremes of the both literal and metaphorical examination of cannibalism as an idea in *The Cook, The Thief*. . . .

MARLENE RODGERS: *In the past you've talked about the seventeenth century having correspondences in our own times. In what ways to you feel* The Tempest *is particularly relevant now?*

The Tempest, of course, is a play all about beginnings and endings, which makes it perhaps very relevant to the end of the century, the end of the millennium. Miranda is given those words which Huxley used, "O brave new world/That has such people in it," which is an extraordinary statement for the future and optimism. I think that I saw about six performances of *The Tempest* on the stage in London last year, and there's now apparently a Danish animated film about *The Tempest* going around, and of course there's the famous Peter Brook that is now travelling the world, so it seems to be a very, very useful and contemporary piece to play with.

Another nice thing is that Shakespeare begins to eschew narrative [in the last plays], he's not worried about all those narrative niceties any more. He jumps time, he changes locations very dramati-

Peter Greenaway with John Gielgud on the set of *Prospero's Books*

cally, all those sorts of things which I'm interested in. Because I'm not particularly interested in contemporary psychodrama—with all that pseudo-supermarket Freudian analysis of character which becomes so boring—that has now been going on so long, especially in dominant cinema, which itself seems to be simply an illustrational medium, illustrating novels all the time, not even twentieth-century novels but nineteenth-century novels. I mean, what film can you see that's actually taken cognizance of James Joyce, for example? I've made comments about cinema not reaching Cubism yet, but there hasn't even been an awareness of Joyce. When these other art forms have taken great imaginative leaps, cinema tragically has remained very conventional and backward-looking. You can see why, of course: great sums of money are necessary, great collaborative efforts, distribution and exhibition systems that are very moribund and reactionary. So, as you can see with my cinema, I'm trying very hard, maybe overambitiously—for myself as well as for any other purposes—to begin to explore these sorts of examples that exist cross-culturally.

What is your own theory of character, given that you're not interested in the traditional psychological exploration of character?

You know the novels of Heinrich von Kleist? There is a way in which this writer, who is writing about the eighteen-twenties, had a great sense of de facto examination of characters, so that there was never any attempt to explain. Characters were given characteristics and there was no attempt to delve into Oedipal problems and the traumas of childhood and all that sort of association. And

there's a way that I really like that approach. Another thing that I'm trying to do—since Prospero has become an industry—I've written a novel called *Prospero's Creatures*, which is about all those allegorical creatures that dart about in the penumbra areas of the film. Because I've been interested for a very long time in allegory. Allegory is very largely not important to us anymore. We have Father Time with the attribute of the scythe, and maybe Blind Justice holding the scales, but compared to the plethora of allegorical figures that inhabited the seventeenth-century imagination there is no comparison to be made anymore. And all those characters in the tracking shots behind the title, I've tried to find as many characters as I could who had an allegorical reference to water. So, just to name a few, you get Mr. and Mrs. Noah with their ark, you get references to Moses in the bulrushes, there are examples of Leda and the Swan, there are examples of Icarus falling into the sea—all those mythological allegorical figures that have some association, since it is *The Tempest*, with water. And I use this sort of idea elsewhere according to whatever else is happening on the screen. So . . . an examination of characters as ciphers, characters carrying the weight of an allegorical significance. *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover:* the very title implies all cooks, all thieves, all wives, all lovers. It's like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the so-and-so's tale, the so-and-so's tale, and the so-and-so's tale. And these characters are all brought together into one particular situation. I've often been castigated for not wishing to develop the characters in a three-dimensional sense, but I'm not really interested if their grandmother was called Grace and had a dog called Fido. So quite readily, without apology, characters for me have to hold a weight of allegorical and personifying meaning.

Yet there were a lot of psychological insights into character to be taken out of The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover.

Inevitably, inevitably. You could work up great theses about the sexuality of Albert Spica, for example, and his interest in the lavatory rather than the bedroom and his concern for the sexual apparatus being so near the digestive tract and all that. Of course that was there for those readings, but I would also like all these other readings to be apparent.

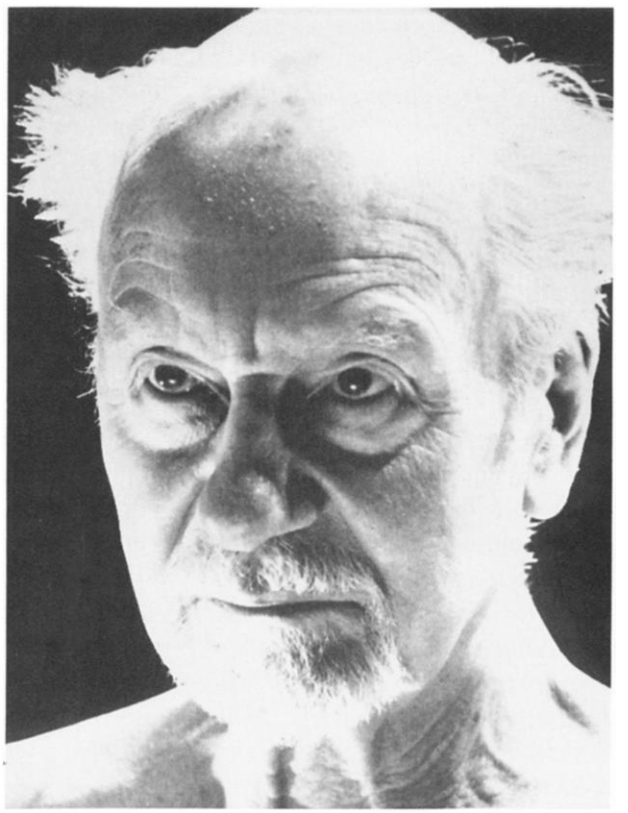
The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover . . . at dinner

I want to come back to the water imagery in The Tempest *you were talking of earlier. This is obviously a very strong element in the play, but it seems that water imagery has had a special fascination for you in your other films, too. Most obviously in* Drowning by Numbers, *but also in other films, including your short,* Making a Splash, *which was a sort of ode to water.*

Well, on a practical level, water is fantastically photogenic. But of course, the world is four-fifths water, we're all born in amniotic fluid, water is a big cleansing medium whether it's literal or metaphorical. On another, pragmatic level, water provides almost a legitimate opportunity for people to be seen nude, in the case of *Twenty-six Bathrooms*, for example. But it literally is the oil of life, it is the blood of life, which splashes, dribbles, washes, roars—it's a great friend and a terrifying enemy, it has all those significances. And there is a way in which somehow water is the unguent, the balm, the cooling agent of a lot of the dramas of all the films. And I suspect I should go on using it, too.

You suggest in your notes to Prospero's Books *that the books Prospero has on his island are responsible for making him the paradoxical character that he is. To what extent did you actually use the books as a means of reflecting on Prospero's character?*

On a slightly facetious note, if *The Cook, The Thief* . . . was a film about "You are what you eat," *Prospero's Books* is a film about "You are what you read." We're all products of our education, our cultural background, which very largely is perceived through text. Text is so desperately important in this film. All the images come out of Prospero's inkwell, as though the inkwell were a top hat, with the magician pulling out the scarves, image after image. And there's a way in which each time a book is brought forth, it indicates a slight change in Prospero's behavior. Because sometimes he is a stern grandfather, sometimes he is rather avuncular—he has an avuncular relationship with Ariel. Sometimes he is a dictator, wearing the hat of a doge, representative of a maritime power. Sometimes he is a beneficent magician. Sometimes he is worried about his daughter's virginity. His character changes all the time, so we introduce a book which might, as it were, explain the cultural references that made him the man he was.



John Gielgud as Prospero

So the books are working on that level, as well as introducing the vast plethora of Prospero's knowledge. In some senses the whole film is going on in his head; there are all the masses and masses of knowledge that a scholar accumulates, some of it quite wasteful, some of it quite bad. There are images obviously from Michelangelo but also from nineteenth-century salon painting, there's high art and low art. You know this post-Warhol attitude towards the elevation of kitsch into something more significant. Although the film is posited in 1611, Prospero has—as a magician—foresight. He embraces the art of the future, as well as the art of the past.

A narcissistic desire for omnipotence drives a lot of seventeenth-century protagonists, as well as some of your characters, like Albert Spica, for example. They crave the kind of godlike power that Prospero possesses. It is ironic that at the end of The Tempest, *Prospero relinquishes that power by destroying his books.*

I have a great antipathy to that ending and would take up a quarrel with Shakespeare, if I could be so bold in my humble position as an eccentric English film-maker at the end of the twentieth century. I could never imagine that there would be any great significance gained by throwing away knowledge—I don't think you can throw away knowledge. And the correspondence for our present reality that is important to me is that we have invested ourselves with so much knowledge that I think we ourselves have almost become magicians. We can alter nature's course almost, with our creation of the atomic bomb, and with all the investigations into embryology and DNA and so on—you know this whole business about genetic manipulation of continuums. I don't think you can de-knowledge yourself, you can't un-knowledge yourself, so the gesture of throwing books away is a peculiarly wasteful one. It's also a very selfish one, too, because even if we cannot use the value of those books ourselves, other people can, so somehow it's almost not just denying knowledge to himself but to everyone else too.

There is, I suppose, even one more gesture after the throwing away of the books. You must remember the last two—a collection of Shakespeare's plays and *The Tempest*—are preserved. Otherwise of course I wouldn't have the wherewithal to make the film itself. That's a typical postmodernist self-referential gesture at the end. Also, Caliban, the image of the negative aspect of the island, so-called, is the savior of the books, which is I think a nice ironic gesture. But even when that's done, we still see the final, almost apocalyptic release of Ariel, the final gasp or release of the spirit. So you see them [the Ariels] running, through fire and water, through the main elements towards us. Finally there is the little child who runs to the audience almost like a child would run so that you could embrace it, catch it with a great sense of innocence and pleasure. But then he too escapes our grasp—*whhht*—and goes flying up into the sky. And all that we're left with is the equivalent of a safety curtain that has come down between us and this whole world. This whole universe now gradually disappears and all we're left with is a few scribbles, some animated graffiti. And then finally we hear on the sound track this huge splash and we're right back again at the beginning of the play, which began with those single drips. So—the final release of the spirit when you've thrown the knowledge away.

In divesting himself of power and of knowledge, Prospero is of course preparing for death —even though he is going back to Milan.

There's that beautiful, very last thing he says before the burning of the books, "And thence retire me to my Milan, where / Every third thought shall be my grave."

Prospero feels a strong sense of inevitability. There's a way in which he wants his power back again, and he could conceivably return to Milan fully fleshed as the Duke. But by bringing Miranda and Ferdinand together, he does hand over the power—he's passing it over to the next generation. He's finally resigned himself to the fact that he is no longer significant, that the rod of power had already by that gesture passed on.

This sense of reconciliation is a common thread in all of Shakespeare's last plays. The other interesting thing that they have in common is that the men abandon their quests for power and domination and make some peace with their own vulnerability and the contingencies of the natural world. The fathers, like Prospero, rely on their daughters to carry on their identities through bearing children, rather than relying on their sons to maintain their honor through deeds and achievements.

The fallback Darwinian position—where we are all basically just carriers of the genetic material and we're only here in some senses just to pass it on. The corollary of that, which is terrifying to some people, is that if you do not pass it on, you're valueless. So that if you don't have children, your purposes on earth are invalidated, which is quite a terrifying sentence for all those people who have no wish to procreate, or no desire, or no opportunity. I've done my procreation—I'm idling my way between now and death, my purpose on earth has been completed.

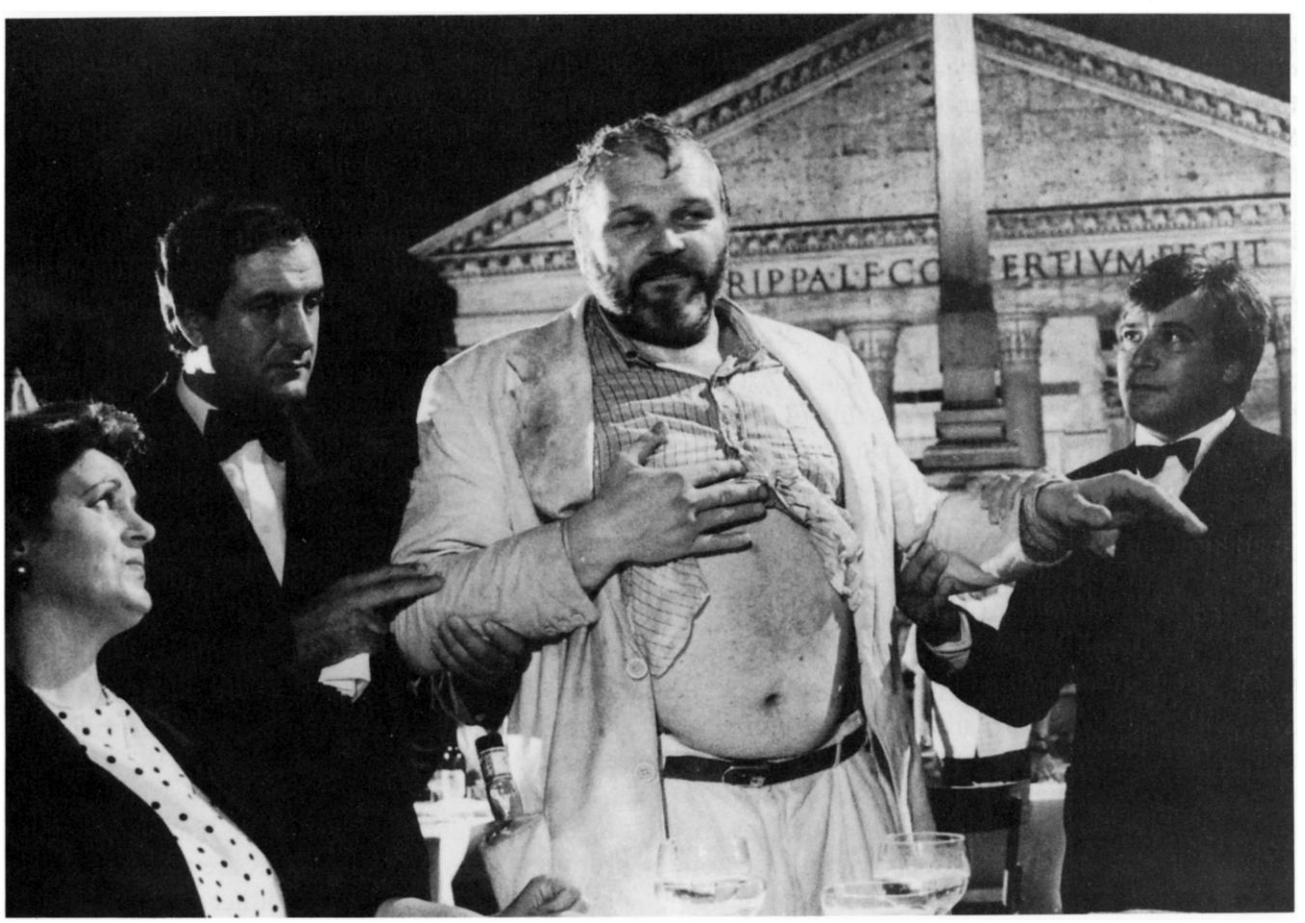
Unless we believe that our civilizing projects, art and so on, are worth doing.

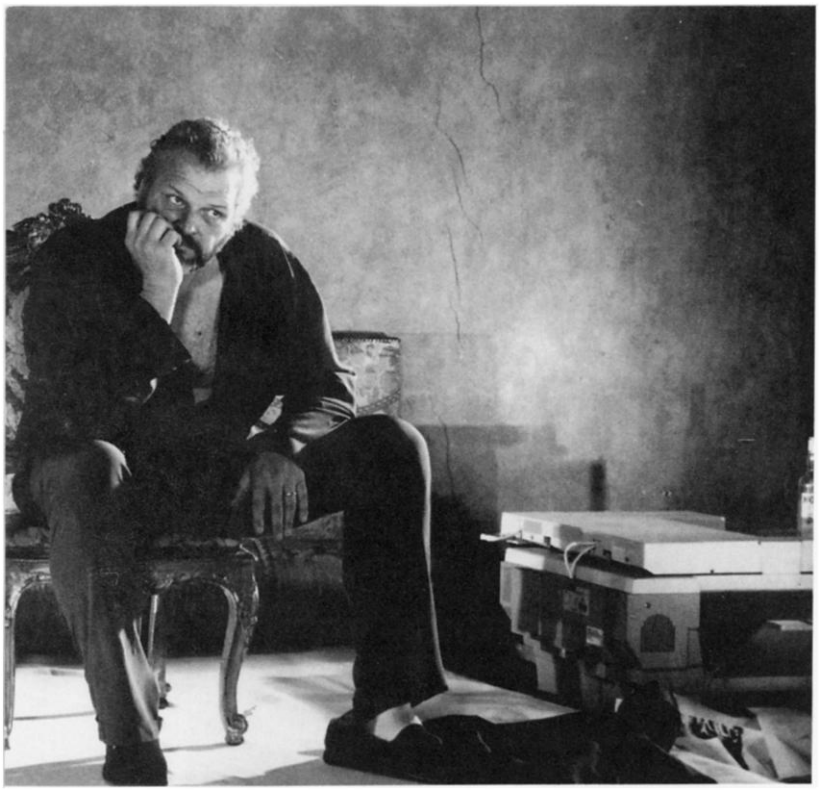
Well, there's a way in which maybe that's only merely decorating the nest.

You've said before that in The Belly of an Architect *one of your questions is "Is art worth doing?"—and this is perhaps one of the questions Prospero's gesture suggests at the end of the play.*

The Belly has become retrospectively very, very sensitive material for me. There is the central argument between a public and a private life, which is very important for a creator—and the film makes lots of personal references to myself and my family and my offspring and my next of kin. But also, it does really examine this question of "Can art make you immortal?" It's posited in Rome, the city of eternity. That title suggests that it's the longest-living, the longest-existing—certainly architecturally—city that there's ever been in the Western world. But also one must remember that Rome, both in the ancient empire and certainly in the Second World War, was the home of fascism. Ultimate power, ultimate narcissism, personified in someone like Mussolini, taken to extremes. And Rome is full of monuments to death and glory, ruins, enormous pyramids to Sestius, triumphal arches representing slavery, representing colonization of the rest of Europe. So Rome itself is the most extraordinary image of all these power crises: it has kings, it has republics, it has democracies, it has Garibaldi, it has emperors like Napoleon, it has oligarchies, it has the most extraordinary range of political systems. And that Roman power and glory and might and narcissism —and the political ideas taken to extremes—were all part of what was represented by Storely Kracklite, the architect who comes from Chicago, which Upton Sinclair described as the city of blood, meat, and money. Those descriptions can perhaps be used for Rome, too.

The Belly of an Architect: Brian Dennehy and the monuments of Rome





Mechanical reproduction

The film is also about the way that man reproduces himself. At the beginning we see a lot of three-dimensional sculpture, one way of man reproducing himself, a very complicated and expensive and time-consuming way. A little later on we begin to examine painted representations of man at that bathhouse scene, and then there's that representation of man through photography, and finally the most banal of all, through photocopying. Now there are more photocopies in the world than there are photographs, there are more photographs than there are paintings, and there are more paintings than there are sculptures. There is a way in which we have increased the banality in proportion to the accuracy with which man actually finds a picture of himself. Because after all, a photocopy is supposedly an exact reproduction of the original that you put into a machine. But all these things fail, all these attempts to continue man in sort of an artistic sense or a search for immortality, and the film ends with the cry of a child. Rather clichéd, rather contrived, how the actual birth of his child happens at the selfsame moment as the artist himself, the architect, throws himself out the window. Suggesting that this is the only way we can ever conceivably imagine any sense of immortality. Which throws an enormous question on the significances not only of civilization but of all cultural pursuits. So it's still a question for me —am I doing something which is valuable, is this a total waste of time, what am I doing, what do I think I'm doing, and all those problems. In that sense it's a very, very personal film.

Your work seems to address this tension again and again, the tension between the desire to control the world, whether through force or through ideas, and the reality of our own vulnerability to chaos and the natural processes of decay.

Without necessarily in any sense attempting any consoling solution to the matter, because it is to continue an ongoing debate. But that's perfectly true. There's also a way that all my heroes are mediocre people. The Draughtsman is a middling artist, capable of making a likeness but hardly very profound and not very intelligent; he gets completely hoodwinked by these rather intelligent women. The two behavioral scientists in *A Zed and Two Noughts*—again not particularly bright in the head—mediocre sorts of people in some senses. And Storely Kracklite is easily hoodwinked by the Italians. It's so Henry Jamesian, the naive, pioneering, blustering American who goes to the old world and gets completely controlled and manipulated. I suppose the coroner in *Drowning by Numbers* in some senses is also part of that, a man who just cannot get it together. *Drowning* is very much about male impotency, and for that read mankind's impotency in controlling the circumstances, what he likes and dislikes. And Albert Spica, of course, is a totally mediocre man through and through. He takes mediocrity to a high art form and uses it for terrifying ends because he's such a philistine. I don't know quite what you would make of that. I suppose they're all self-portraits of a sort, shades of feeling about whether one has the apparatus to control or organize these power plays, or these principles, or this continual discussion about immortality.

It's also interesting that all these people are creators. I suppose one could say, "the film-maker's contract" or "the belly of a film-maker." It's obviously too close to home to do that, so I slightly remove it. But there's a way in which the whole of *Belly* could be said to be not so much about putting on an exhibition as making a film. Because the producers are there, the critics are there, the people who finally take the product away from the artist are there. In a sense, building a piece of

architecture is like making a film. It has to satisfy certain sorts of audiences. It has to be practical. It has to fulfill aesthetic obligations, it has to return its money to its backers, and in some senses it has to have a stake in mortality, insofar as buildings are meant to last for a long time, and I sincerely believe that somehow films need to last at least over several generations so that several people can view them and use them and address themselves to them.

Stylistically it seemed to me that Prospero's Books *was very close to* TV Dante*, in which you were also bringing together your images and a very renowned literary text. However, the technologies used in* Prospero's Books *and* TV Dante *were obviously very different.*

There is a way that *Prospero's Books* is *The Cook, The Thief . . .* meets *TV Dante*—the two big vocabularies of film and television that I'm trying very hard to bring together, which is so exciting. The opportunity I had to work with a number of Japanese backers was instrumental in making *Prospero's Books*. There's no way I could have used the low-tech television that's represented by *TV Dante* and put it up against 35mm without embarrassment, because the quality's so bad. But with the new technical equipment of high definition, we have 100-percent improvement, because there are twice as many lines on the television screen. Very obviously this is like a picture in the newspaper—the more dots you have the higher quality the picture. There's still a long way to go because the technology hasn't been fully perfected yet, but it did give me the courage to feel that a TV picture finally could be put up against a 35mm picture of excellent quality. I could finally consider a marriage between the two—and I want to go on and on doing this because I think it's very exciting.

What's the next project?

Fifty-five Men on Horseback, which I suppose is sort of a *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* [set in the mid-eighteenth century], but communicating a courtship not through letters but through the sending of horse portraits. Rather strange and eccentric, and it's putting a load of information on the horse as being a symbol of virility, energy, sexuality, status, all those things that are often put on the contemporary motor car. And 1760 represents perhaps the height of attention being paid to the horse, and the horse and carriage. It's the beginning of road building in England, and the very first road in England was the road from London to Newmarket, where young bloods could rev up their horses and have races. The film is about fact and fantasy in courtship, so the parts of the film that have to do with fact are probably going to be shot in CinemaScope black and white, and for the parts to do with fantasy I'll try to use highly colored television techniques. I still haven't quite worked out a way to combine the two elements, especially since I want to try to reproduce a very careful kind of landscape that's relative to the paintings of George Stubbs and possibly Gainsborough as well. So on the aesthetic level, beyond the use of content, the film will try to bring together these ideas of the fact and fantasy of courtship.

What's happened with the trilogy that was going to come out of The Cook, The Thief . . . *?*

Those films are certainly there; the scripts haven't been completely finished yet, but I could certainly finish them very quickly. One is based on the Medea myth about a woman who kills her own child—*The Love of Ruins.* It is almost a technical exercise to see if I can convince an audience or make an audience sympathetic to a woman who kills her own child. Which again is delving into those same taboo areas that I did in *The Cook, The Thief . . .* —into cannibalism and going back again into the incestuous areas that are dealt with in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore.* And the last one is based on the myth of Apollo and Marsyas, who had this competition about who could make the best music, and of course Apollo won, and the punishment was that Marsyas had to be flayed alive. It's based very much on that last painting by Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas.* But the title of the film is *The Man Who Met Himself*—what would we do if we actually met ourselves, not a twin, not a clone, but ourselves. How would we react—intellectually? sensuously? sexually? What would happen? Because it's only us who know, or think we know, what is best for ourselves.

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The Many Faces of *Thelma & Louise*

Some of the spirit of Ridley Scott's 1991 breakaway hit has entered the realm of public discourse: the New York Times *spoke of ". . . the press . . . beginning to hear from fellow Republicans that Bush's top aides are squandering precious political capital as if on a 'Thelma-and-Louise'-style spree." (Nov. 22, 1991, p. A11). In light of the sometimes vehemently differing reactions to this film,* FQ *invited a number of its contributors to offer their impressions—not as reviews but as brief illuminations of a facet each found particularly interesting. These are their responses.* A.M.

Thelma & Louise's Exuberant Polysemy

Like Robert Altman and Blake Edwards, Ridley Scott often works with popular genre toward revisionist ends. His first commercial effort (*The Duellists*, 1977) deployed the swashbuckler's derring-do to advance an ironic pacifism. He went on to critique the greed of contemporary corporate practice, first with a canny blending of horror and science-fiction strategies (*Alien*, 1979), then by marrying science-fiction conventions to the tropes of noir (*Blade Runner*, 1982).

The director's latest project, *Thelma & Louise*, arguably wins the prize for sheer number of genres interrogated against the grain in a single Scott picture. I mark the signature of classic and contemporary Westerns, sundry types of road film (doomed/outlaw/lovers subgenre in particular), and the seventies "buddy" movie.

Thelma & Louise's ideological agenda has caused exceptionally polarized debate. The film has been variously interpreted as feminist manifesto (the heroines are ordinary women, driven to extraordinary ends by male oppression) and as profoundly antifeminist (the heroines are dangerous phallic caricatures of the very macho violence they're supposedly protesting). Some critics have discerned a lesbian subtext (that final soul kiss at the abyss); others interpret this reading as a demeaning negation of feminine friendship that flies in the face of patriarchal authority.

These vehemently opposed critiques own, as it were, a piece of the ideological action. One is reminded of the blind men in the folk tale, each of whom affirmed that his description of the elephant —based on the part he grasped—was the only true account of the beast. By the very historical grounds of their creation, big, popular entertainments like *Thelma & Louise* often contain both reactionary and progressive elements, more or less ajar.[1]

A director of liberal inclinations like Scott still functions within an industry and culture profoundly saturated with the premises of corporate capitalism. The latter may intrude upon a project directly, or through subtler invasions of the creator's psyche. The result is a highly *polysemic* text: such a film typically offers a wide range of possibility for contestation across the political spectrum over issues "whose time has come" out of one contemporary circumstance or another (e.g., *Easy Rider*, 1969; *The Deer Hunter*, 1978).

Taking pictures: Susan Sarandon (left) as Louise and Geena Davis as Thelma

Thelma & Louise's ideological polysemy is abetted by the director's characteristic dense cinematic and artistic intertextuality (central quotations on the latter score include Ansel Adams and the nineteen-eighties Hyperrealists). Callie Khouri's script also enhances the film's ambiguous openness for interpretation by sharply scanting information about the protagonists' prior lives, except for a few bold strokes. What one gets of the women is essentially what one sees.

Scott is a formidable entertainer, but he lacks Edwards' or Altman's subversive boldness (at their best). His critiques are increasingly vitiated by tidy "with the grain" resolutions (in this sense, *Thelma & Louise*'s unhappy ending is as problematic as *Blade Runner*'s infamous happy ending). It may nevertheless be argued that we should feel lucky for *Thelma & Louise*'s raucous probe of the Second Sex's still dismal status in Bushy America, given Hollywood's current gentler, kinder predilection for the bimbos (and bitches) of *Working Girl* and *Pretty Woman*.

But one must wonder if—Gramsci, thou art with us yet—we're *supposed* to feel lucky, and let it go at that. . . . HARVEY R. GREENBERG

1. See my earlier critique of *Star Trek* in "In Search of Spock: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 12 (1984), pp. 52-65; and Douglas Kellner's work along these lines in "*Blade Runner*: A Diagnostic Critique," *Jump Cut*, no. 29 (1984), pp. 6-8, and Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

Crossing Over

To focus, as the debate about *Thelma & Louise* did, on those men who disliked it is to miss what I think is the far more significant fact that large numbers of men both saw and *did* like it. Precious few American films have had women at the center and men on the periphery, and what ones there are have not, for the most part, drawn large male audiences—a pattern that has sustained the claim that whereas women are willing to "identify" with screen males, the converse is not the case. What the success of *Thelma & Louise* with male audiences suggests is that if you write the parts right and execute them with conviction, the sex of the players is no object: if the buddy-escape plot is conventionally male, it is not intrinsically so, and lots of men were evidently happy to enter into that very American fantasy even when it is enacted by women, even when the particulars are female-specific (rape, macho husband, leering co-worker), and even when the inflection is remarkably feminist. And although the film showed signs of defensiveness on this point (the *niceness* of the Harvey Keitel figure struck me as something of a sop to the men in the audience) it was on the whole surefooted in its assumption that its viewers, regardless of sex, would engage with the women's story. When someone can say, as Geena Davis did in an interview, that "If you're threatened by this movie, you're identifying with the wrong person," a real corner in gender representation has been turned in mainstream film history. I emphasize "mainstream" here, for the same corner was turned in so-called exploitation cinema some 15 years ago. Fans of horror recognize the "tough-girl heroes" of films like *Thelma & Louise, Silence of the Lambs, Sleeping with the Enemy,* and *Mortal Thoughts* as upscale immigrants from slasher and rape-revenge movies of the eighties—forms that reveal in no uncertain terms the willingness, not to say desire, of the male viewer to feel not just *at* but *through* female figures on screen. Perhaps the mainstreaming of that operation, in films like *Thelma & Louise*, will call it to the attention of theory, which has not done full justice to "wrong-direction" cross-gender imaginings.

CAROL J. CLOVER

Bacchantes at Large

Not only is *Thelma & Louise* an entertaining and picaresque tragicomedy, but it is also a vivid portrait of contemporary Americana, where women are still struggling to redefine their individualities: it is a symbolic perusal of feminine inconsistencies. Louise Sawyer (Susan Sarandon) and Thelma Dickinson (Geena Davis) are aspects of female escapism, an urgent undercurrent in American society that seems to cultivate a mostly unfulfilled yearning for women to run away from the boredom and sexual entrapment to which they are condemned.

Here is a film that reveals a sad decline in American culture, with its facile acceptances of empty pleasures and demoralized sexual chauvinism toward women. Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* and Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* displayed the male attraction for a wayward, motorized sort of outlaw wandering across America, with freedom of highways correlated to a promise of adventure and, most of all, hedonistic fun. The heroines of *Thelma & Louise* offer the same thing, but with the pathetic fallacy of American open spaces mainly representing precursors of doom beyond desire.

Callie Khouri's screenplay manages to offer detailed, believable characters—in Thelma and Louise themselves and in the various men who surround them during their escapades. Sarandon had already captured the essence of hard-edged self-assurance as the tart-tongued waitress in *White Palace*, and her portrayal of Louise rounds out and explores feminine defiances. Davis's vulnerable Thelma (reminding one of a younger version of Shirley Booth's Lola in Inge's *Come Back Little Sheba*) is a perfect complement to Louise's personality. The director (Ridley Scott at his most visual) deftly contrasts Louise's neat kitchen with Thelma's fridgefull of half-eaten Snickers bars, as well as their variant styles of packing suitcases. It is Thelma's jubilant rush toward freedom from her husband, Darryl (Christopher McDonald), a perfect example of the Playboy Philosopher, that sets the tone of recklessness as the women set forth. Thelma's near-rape by redneck Harlan (Timothy Carhart) at the Silver Bullet, a roadside country-

Thelma and her rebel without a cause (Brad Pitt as J.D.)

western bar that is more-Texan-than-Texas, is the catalyst for sudden violence and death; this changes their original exuberance to anxieties which gradually strengthen bonds of love and loyalty between them as they continue their flight from the law.

Louise's version of the world around them is totally realistic, and her continued exasperations with Thelma's naiveté become bitter commentaries on the failure of her own hope and a particular world-weariness regarding any future happiness for either of them.

When Louise's boyfriend, Jimmy (Michael Madsen), finds them and offers her marriage she is too resigned by disillusioned romances to accept him, and Thelma finds the James Dean-Bruce Weber image of J.D. (Brad Pitt), a handsome drifter, too irresistible a sex symbol to dismiss, causing further disruption of Louise's plan for an escape to Mexico. The director and his cinematographer (Adrian Biddle) wrap beautiful visions around the errant women racing along in their dusty convertible, singing out their calls-of-the-wild.

Much attention is given to landscape; the imitation Hollywood motels off the highways; a conglomerate of oil wells in dusty twilights; and faces of aged, displaced people, seen briefly in doorways and windows, remnants of lost dreams (particularly for Louise, who notices them). The eternal desert monoliths add to the isolated status of the women's flight toward the border.

Thelma and Louise's ultimate gestures of feminine liberation are exemplified by their total humiliation of a lewd truck driver and the subsequent subjugation of an arrogant young state trooper (Jason Beghe), who is reduced to tears by their domination. These are episodes of high humor, leaving one unprepared for the denouement. The essential humanity of Thelma and Louise, for all their luckless travails, wins one's sympathies, and although a happy ending is desired, their leap into the void is a final stamp upon one's conscience: they are only two beautiful, easygoing women who recognize that they can no longer tolerate a deepshit status in a man-made American universe. ALBERT JOHNSON

Thelma & Louise as Screwball Comedy

The elements are familiar: the killing, the robbery, the flight from the police, the high-speed car chase. It is little wonder that many critics see Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* as an outlaw film. However, it also displays key elements of a screwball comedy, of which the "road screwball" is an important subgenre (best exemplified by *It Happened One Night*, 1934) whose themes include

Role reversal: Jason Beghe as the hapless state trooper

escaping the constraints of authority for the freedom of the open road, playing out different roles, and ultimately shedding one's old identity for a new one.

While outlaw films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* have scenes of deadpan humor, these moments generally do not suggest the self-awareness or growth typical of the smart, witty screwball heroine. In *Thelma & Louise*, however, when J.D. suggests that Thelma's husband is an "asshole," and Thelma agrees "He *is* an asshole. Most of the time I just let it slide," we see a classic screwball heroine assuming a certain control over her life while also maintaining a sense of irony toward her childish husband.

Liberation and growth through role-playing—distinctive features of the screwball tradition—figure prominently in *Thelma & Louise*, especially in Thelma's robbery of the market, her personal turning point when she casts aside all inhibitions, takes on the persona of an outlaw, and gains a new sense of freedom. She uses the theatrical "robbery speech" that J.D. has taught her, but does not become a copy of a male outlaw. Rather, she makes the role her own and adjusts the robbery to suit her own tastes when she asks for a couple of bottles of Wild Turkey, which has become her favorite drink on the road. Thelma, then, sheds her identity as a timid, even childlike housewife by relying on her own instincts and creativity within the outlaw role. Although Thelma's crime initially shocks Louise, she soon gets caught up in the fun, and their laughter and sense of exhilaration as they drive away from "the scene of our last goddamn crime!" (as Louise enthusiastically puts it) solidifies them as a screwball couple having fun with their outlaw personae, goofing off on the road, and taking control of their lives in the process.

In the encounter with the state trooper, a wisecrack diffuses a potentially violent moment as Thelma, holding a gun on the officer as he explains that he has a wife and kids, advises him, "You be sweet to 'em, especially your wife. My husband wasn't sweet to me. Look how I turned out"—the smart, sassy lines of a screwball heroine who has a sense of humor about her situation. Instead of a disturbing confrontation, we have a prank (they lock the officer in his trunk) and sharp, funny dialogue, more akin to the fun of a screwball couple defying authority (perhaps Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby*) than outlaws at odds with society in general.

While Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis have enetered the pantheon of great screwball couples, their sense of freedom poses a generic problem, since the screwball couple normally achieves a clarity of vision that enables them to be reintegrated into society. As a female screwball couple who have no desire to return to their old lives and are actually being hunted by male society, Thelma and Louise cannot follow this pattern, but the film itself finds a way of going beyond the usual screwball marriage. Finally surrounded by police and choosing to drive over the edge of the Grand Canyon rather than be captured, Thelma and Louise first kiss and then clasp hands in a mystical marriage that distinguishes the film as the most unique screwball ever made—not simply because it presents a marriage of females but because it is a transcendent, not a social, marriage and ultimately an apotheosis, a mythic flight into forever.

PETER N. CHUMO II

Narrative Organization

Thelma & Louise has no voice-over narration, makes no use of the frequentive, and has no flashbacks or flash-forwards. Like many, perhaps most films, it tells its story in chronological order, in what might be described as an unfolding present. What is unlike other films, however, are the ways in which *Thelma & Louise* organizes narrative time and the distinctive temporalities, fundamental to all the effects and meanings of the film, that result.

The killing of Harlan turns the lives of Thelma and Louise upside down: suddenly their relation to the past is uncertain; their future unknown. They flee to the open road, "not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern" (Melville). The film itself fissures at this point, launching a parallel montage between investigating police and escaping women that is sustained until the film's-end face-off at the Grand Canyon.

The time dimensions of the title characters' flight are surprisingly indeterminate—not only the hour and the day of any given scene but also how much time is supposed to have elapsed between any two successive scenes and how long it has been since their journey began. The few clues provided are retrospective. Thelma says well after the fact that it was 4:00 AM when she first tried to reach Darryl by telephone—where was he? Later she tells the state trooper they hold at gunpoint that she and Louise would never have pulled a stunt like this three days ago—they seem to have been gone much longer than that. The alternation of filmic night and day usually time-orients viewers but this too is undermined, and time stretched out, by the women's driving around the clock; the Oklahoma City episode—Louise in one room with Jimmy; Thelma in another with J.D.—is their single off-road night.[1]

Louise with Jimmy (Michael Madsen)

Fiction-film police work is often shown in a pseudo-documentary manner, sometimes even with the date and hour stamped on the beginning of scenes. However, the police scenes in *Thelma & Louise* are as temporally indeterminate as the women's scenes—we do not know when they take place or how much time elapses between them. How can the film sustain a floating time scheme in each of its two narrative strands? Because the two strands prop each other up: the considerable ellipses within each strand intersperse with those of the other, filling in its gaps and thereby covering for it. Thus the film-makers can break away from Thelma and Louise to the police at any time they wish and come back to them at any later point in their journey they choose. This is a worry-free formal scheme that allows the film-makers to skip what they want to skip and to show what they want to show. A single-stranded *Thelma & Louise* would have had to account for its ellipses, perhaps by dialogue, by time-passing montages, by dissolves, and/or by other devices: a different film.

What is the point of this scheme? It serves to immerse us radically in Thelma and Louise's divided temporality. The characters exist simultaneously in two temporal modes—a continual motion forward and a continual reflection backwards. "Go!" "Go, Go!" and "Go, Go, Go!" are words we hear frequently in the film, even, when Thelma jumps in the car after robbing a convenience store, "Go! Go! Go, Go, Go!" Each of the women has a paralyzing crisis in the course of the film: Thelma after the killing lies inert on a motel bed, then sits in a daze by the pool; Louise after the theft of the money sits on the floor of another motel room in a stupor. The solution in

Ridley Scott (right) on the set of *Thelma & Louise*

both cases, effected by the other character, is to get the stalled one back in the car and on the road. It is the road itself, regardless of destination, which is curative.[2]

In the other temporal mode, awareness lags behind events but comes more forcefully for that reason. (Knowledge that follows action is common in Western literature, especially in tragedy.) Louise shoots Harlan, then, addressing his sitting-up corpse, cautions him to change his behavior: "You watch your mouth." By this point, of course, he cannot speak or hear her words—Louise is temporarily denying the knowledge that will change her life. Thelma seems quicker on the uptake; when Darryl offers neither support nor trust, she understands her fate instantly. "When do we get to Mexico?" she says to Louise, in effect signing on for the long drive. Thelma's most profound realizations come later, however, reflecting her character's astonishing growth. Near the end she understands that Louise was raped in Texas some time ago and that this event still shapes her life. Thinking of the rape that she herself barely escaped, thanks to Louise, Thelma ratifies ex post facto the killing of Harlan, wishing only that she had done it herself. She then says, in the film's crowning realization, "My life would have been ruined much worse than it is now."

BRIAN HENDERSON

1. The film cuts back and forth between the women's rooms here, as it did between their preparations to leave at the beginning of the film; otherwise they are shown together. A partial exception is Thelma's robbery of the convenience store. The camera holds on the waiting Louise while it is occurring, but later we see the event on the videotape from the store's camera that the police and Darryl are watching. In the police narrative strand, the viewing of Thelma in action is a present scene. In relation to the Thelma-Louise narrative strand, however, it is the filling-in of what Gerard Genette calls a lateral ellipsis (or paralipsis), in which a narrative does not skip over a moment in time but sidesteps an element of it. Thus the robbery scene has a dual status—a present scene in the police narrative and a filling-in of a lateral ellipsis in the narrative of Thelma and Louise.
2. Thelma and Louise's destination changes several times in the course of the film: to get away from the scene of the crime; to get out of the state; to reach Oklahoma City where Louise's money is; to escape to Mexico without crossing Texas; then, with the police on their trail and their Mexican plan known, heading further west, and north, to what turns out to be the Grand Canyon.

What Makes a Woman Wander

Thelma and Louise have been much criticized for behaving, in the time-honored tradition of most American heroes, violently and without reflection. Male critics have been especially critical of this violence, claiming that to put women in the male outlaw mold of Butch and Sundance is nihilistic, "toxic feminism" with a fascist theme. Obviously there is something unsettling to male viewers about women with guns. Obviously there is something exhilarating about this same vision to women viewers. But the gender gap that has widened in discussions of this film has, I think, missed the crucial cultural reference. If *Thelma & Louise* offers a gender-bending revision of a basic American myth it is not simply that of the going-out-in-a-blaze-of-glory of Butch and Sundance but something closer to a complex revision of that most resonant of revenge Westerns, John Ford's *The Searchers*.

The Searchers is a revenge saga in which Ethan Edwards, hooked up with a younger male sidekick, obsessively hunts and kills the Indians who raped and killed his brother's wife, Martha, and abducted his niece. *Thelma & Louise* re-imagines the revenge narrative from the point of view of the women who were once its victims. (The exhilaration for women viewers is in the difference.)[1] In both films melancholy, mature heroes (Louise and Ethan) have mysterious, guilty pasts about which they do not speak. Ethan, haunted by an unlawful desire for his brother's wife, shares a measure of guilt with the savages who have raped and abducted her. Though victim of the Indians' violence, Ethan shares in it as well.

Louise too has a clouded past. Something happened to her in Texas and it seems to have been rape. When she sees this crime repeated upon her young friend she, like Ethan, turns mad and vengeful, becoming angry at men the way Ethan is angry at Indians. But the revenge of the women victims is different. It is as if Martha and Debbie in *The Searchers* set out to revenge themselves.

Revenge stories grip us because of their mythic excess. Watching *The Searchers*, we become aware, as Ethan and Martin wander over the Southwestern

On the road

landscape, of the depth of the revenge-seeking hero's alienation from the "sivilization" once equated with things feminine. And watching *Thelma & Louise*, we thrill to another form of alienation—from things masculine. Lighting out for the Territory, or leaping into the void, are no more nihilistic, or toxic, when women do it than men. But they are different. For women to close themselves off to the comforts of home, the alienation and anger must run deep. And the exhilaration of the release from this "sivilization" amounts to something like pure joy. The sheer surprise of *Thelma & Louise* is to have shown, in a way that serious films about the issue of rape (cf., *The Accused*) could never show, how victims of sexual crimes are unaccountably placed in the position of the guilty ones, positioned as fair game for further attack. The thrill of watching this film is the thrill of seeing our deepest and most contradictory myths reworked with female victim-heroes at their center.

LINDA WILLIAMS

1. See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Satire Into Myth

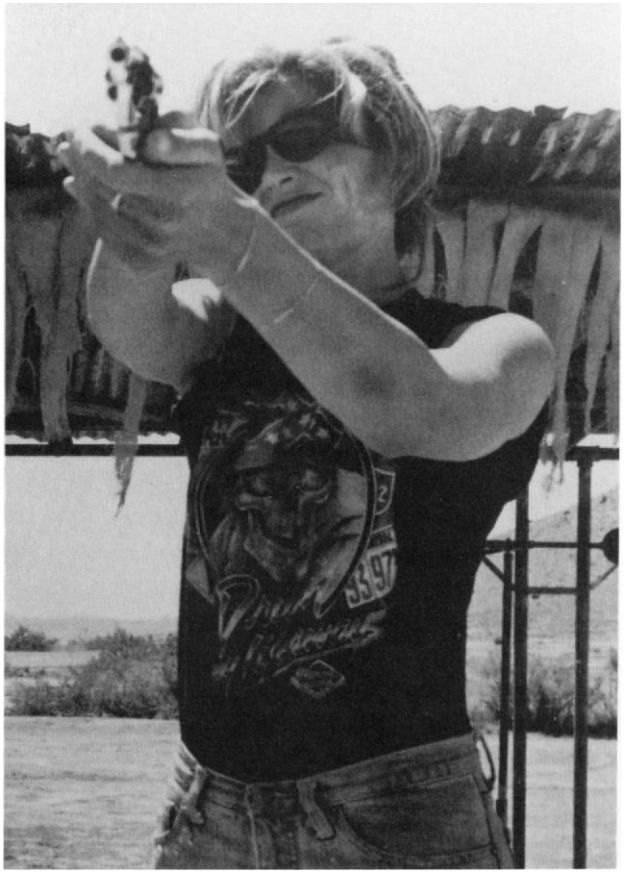
Part of *Thelma & Louise*'s heritage as a belated Western is to begin with a lament for lost space that the main characters only gradually realize *has* been lost. So much of the early part of the film is set in familiar post-Hopper (Edward or Dennis) interiors: roadside cafés, motels, and crowded apartments; Western space, with all its potential for self-enhancement and beginning again, fallen into the sordidness of small-town limitation. The bar where the adventure starts looms like an emblem of fallen romanticism hardly up to the already postheroic *Urban Cowboy*. In the cowboy bootheel slamming of the communal dancing, like some chorus-line crossover of Michael Kidd and Albert Speer, men and women alike wear all the paraphernalia of fantasy western individualism.

In this atmosphere of the ersatz and the fallen, the attempted rape of Thelma in the parking lot and Louise's killing of the rapist cuts through like an icy blast, announcing the violence and brutality under the celluloid-thin myths of self-sufficiency and heroism.

As they escape, when the film truly hits the road, the promise of space and freedom lures them on. But the camera still continues to stress the choking inevitability of the world they are trying to escape, not just the massive machinery, oil drilling equipment, and trucks that constantly threaten to squeeze them out of our vision, but even the seemingly more benevolent spaces and spires of John Ford's Monument Valley.

It's easy enough in many Ford films to point out how narratives that are supposed to cover hundreds of miles all seem to take place within the confines of Monument Valley. But when similar things happen in *Thelma & Louise*, the effect is not the creation of a special world, but a sense of being walled in by expectations and walled in by fate, like the grainy television screen catching Thelma's robbery of the convenience store, making her "famous."

Like so many film noir couples, Thelma and Louise finally head for Mexico, the old place of



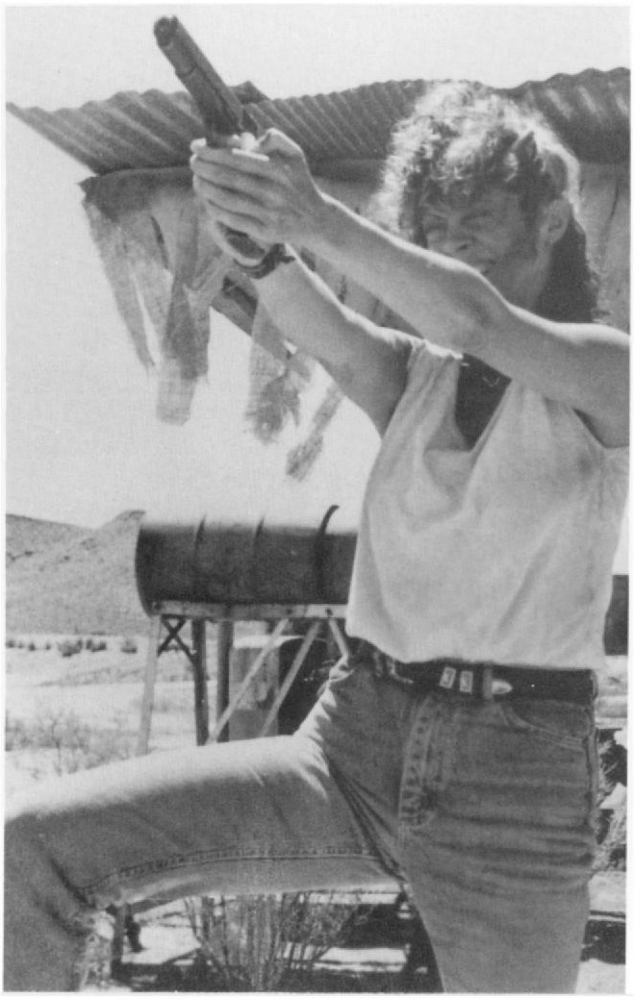
nature and freedom, where you go when the West closes down. Louise's refusal to go to Texas may supply a psychological validity to her killing—the possibility that she herself was raped in Texas. But on the level of the Western and the road film, the refusal of Texas is a refusal of those wide open genre spaces as a solution.

Ridley Scott seems drawn in many of his films to the self-enclosed male character, like Harrison Ford in *Blade Runner* or Harvey Keitel in *The Duellists*, whose fragile identity rests on a suffocating pride. The gloomy setting of the films enwraps and restricts him even as he struggles to be free. But in *Thelma & Louise*, with its female duo of friends, there is a more intense dialectic of enclosure and openness. The sense of fate is qualified by an almost exact existential luxuriance in knowing that fate and facing it.

But unlike Scott's tales of romantically posturing men, *Thelma & Louise* goes in more for wisecracks and the techniques of comic exaggeration than for self-important despair. Many of the more ridiculous attacks against the film took its assertions as somehow realistic arguments about women, men, guns, and violence. But however real *Thelma & Louise* may be, it's not realistic. Its violence erupts within a hard-edged satire of wannabe heroism and consumer identity, and it builds to its conclusion through a series of scenes that emphasize the way in which Scott and Callie Khouri's main characters move out of this heightened satiric reality into myth.

First appears the Rastafarian bicyclist in Monument Valley, who blows ganga into the trunk that holds the motorcycle cop. Then comes the broadly painted incident of the truck driver (with its echoes of Steven Spielberg and Richard Matheson's wonderful *Duel*). And finally the concluding scene itself, as Harvey Keitel, here the sympathetic cop, watches helplessly as Thelma and Louise launch themselves into space and turn, not into magic heroines who manage to land on the other side, or angelic martyrs who crash into the canyon, but into a brightly colored magazine illustration. This last image echoes, as many have noted, Redford and Newman at the end of *Butch Cassidy*. But I think more of the freeze-framed Jean-Pierre Léaud at the end of *400 Blows*, faced with the threatening freedom of the sea. Not gun-toting heroes turning into legends, but hand-holding heroines of thwarted energy turning into a myth of blood, escaping the frame that confines them.

LEO BRAUDY



Thelma & Louise and *Messidor* as Feminist Road Movies

Thelma & Louise bears a striking resemblance to *Messidor* (1979), a film by Swiss filmmaker Alain Tanner, most of whose works address feminist concerns within a broad political context that also includes issues of class conflict, racism, and transnationalism. I don't know whether Callie Khouri or Ridley Scott have seen or were influenced by *Messidor*, or whether it is merely included within the film's rich reservoir of intertextual relations, but a comparison of the two films highlights how deeply rooted *Thelma & Louise* is within its own cultural movement.

Like *Thelma & Louise*, *Messidor* is a road movie about a pair of women who abandon their traditional place in patriarchal culture, a transgression that at first seems trivial but soon turns them into gun-toting outlaws and that ultimately leads to death.[1] While in *Thelma & Louise* the women are two close friends distinguished by age and marital status, in *Messidor* they are two single strangers of the same age (18 and 19) who meet on the road. In both films the "turning point" comes with an attempted rape, which the women avert and avenge with violence.

In *Messidor*, the primary target of the women's rebellion is respectable bourgeois institutions like the patriarchal family, *not* media culture as in *Thelma & Louise*. Scott's spunky heroines encounter a veritable postmodernist parade of treacherous male characters from well-known movies and popular male action genres—including the James Dean look-alike who, despite his useful lessons on sex and robbery, proves to be a rebel without a cause; the foulmouthed trucker without his convoy; and the well-meaning, sensitive cop whose bad timing contributes to their death.

In both films, the women's journey takes them away from the city and into the countryside, where they have a moment of communion with nature that makes them realize there is no going back, and where they move through a mythic landscape that both masks and delineates the nature of their final entrapment. In *Messidor*, the idyllic Swiss landscapes promise an illusory freedom—exaggerated in sweeping aerial shots. These overviews both contradict and disguise the rigid social repression imposed on all inhabitants below; they inspire flight yet provide no way out.

Thelma and Louise's chase is played out against the familiar landscapes from the Western genre—especially Monument Valley and the Badlands. But unlike Jeanne and Marie, who never have a clear destination and whose options and energy wind down, they don't wander aimlessly but rather choose the appropriate generic destination that is known to all those familiar with the Western genre: the Mexican border. One begins to suspect that they are purposely avoiding Texas not only because that was the site of Louise's secret trauma but also to motivate their ending up in the Grand Canyon. For, ultimately, their goal is to perform a sex change on Western mythology—to outdo those macho buddies, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, by making their grand suicidal leap into that great vaginal wonder of the world.

Thelma & Louise begins where *Messidor* ends —in the same kind of small-town restaurant where Jeanne and Marie have their final, fatal showdown with the law. Instead of making a romantic leap into a new feminist mythology, these Swiss outlaws senselessly shoot a customer who they mistakenly think has called the police. They make no attempt to get away. They are never empowered like Thelma and Louise, for they lack their exuberant energy and good humor; as hitchhikers, they have no glamorous shiny convertible and no final gesture of romantic defiance.

Messidor belongs with other European feminist road movies that explore the repression of women in the context of larger issues of history and class conflict and because of this political analysis their tone and conclusions are uncompromising and grim. Avoiding such analysis, *Thelma & Louise* reinscribes a male action genre with gutsy, hyperfeminine heroines who succeed in outshooting their macho antagonists, and thus the film is more like Cassavetes' *Gloria* (1980) and Ridley Scott's own *Alien* (1979).

In the nineteen-nineties, there is no longer the widespread belief that incisive political analysis can help one control the process of rapid restructuring that the world is undergoing. Instead there is a

growing confidence in making endless revisions in the basic paradigm. And in the case of cinema and mass media the prevailing paradigms are Hollywood genres, for American pop culture is now our only remaining successful world export. Once these films, television programs, and genres were reconceptualized as software, they became more malleable and vulnerable to appropriation and ideological reinscription, not only by American independents but also by multinational corporations, spectators, and emigrés—including a British import like Ridley Scott. Perhaps that's why *Thelma & Louise*—with its glamorous images of gun-toting female buddies who stand up to rape and sexual harrassment—might ultimately prove to be more politically effective in the nineties than *Messidor* was in the seventies. MARSHA KINDER

1. The following description of *Messidor* is influenced by Beverle Houston's essay "*Messidor*: A Post-Structuralist Reading," *Women and Literature* (Fall 1984).

▪ Contributors: Leo Braudy, Brian Henderson, Albert Johnson, Marsha Kinder, and Linda Williams are on the *FQ* Editorial Board; Peter N. Chumo II's master's thesis explored self-reflexivity in American film; Carol J. Clover, a medievalist at the University of California at Berkeley, is the author of *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*; and Dr. Harvey R. Greenberg is Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York and author of *Movies on Your Mind.*

Editor's Note

Film Quarterly... Ernest (Chick) Callenbach—it is sad to see this 33-year partnership end. Chick is a hard act to follow—and a wise, gracious, and modest one. We wish him well in his non-retiring retirement. It is our good fortune that among the many activities he has planned is participation on *FQ*'s Editorial Board, where he replaces John Fell, whose long and valuable contribution to the journal as the board's ranking historian can be acknowledged here, although not in the measure that it deserves. We also bid farewell, and give thanks, to our Boston Editor, Randall Conrad, and to Colin Young in London, whose place will be taken by Edward Buscombe, Head of Trade Publishing at the British Film Institute.

In his "farewell," Chick spoke of nostalgia as well as of new freedoms. I, on the other hand, feel an almost unseemly sense of exhilaration at being in this position. To provide a place for analysis and discussion of the films and books and ideas that I love—this is like spending one's working hours browsing through a giant toy store of the mind. As Chick's successor, I hope to continue his tradition—with the encouragement and guidance of an exceptionally generous and supportive editorial board. I intend to keep the journal open-minded and assertive; to publish the best and the about-to-be best; and to ensure that in these pages the field of film and video studies will continue to contemplate its history and consider its practice with intelligence and enthusiasm . . . and some daring. A.M.

A Note to Readers

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Reviews

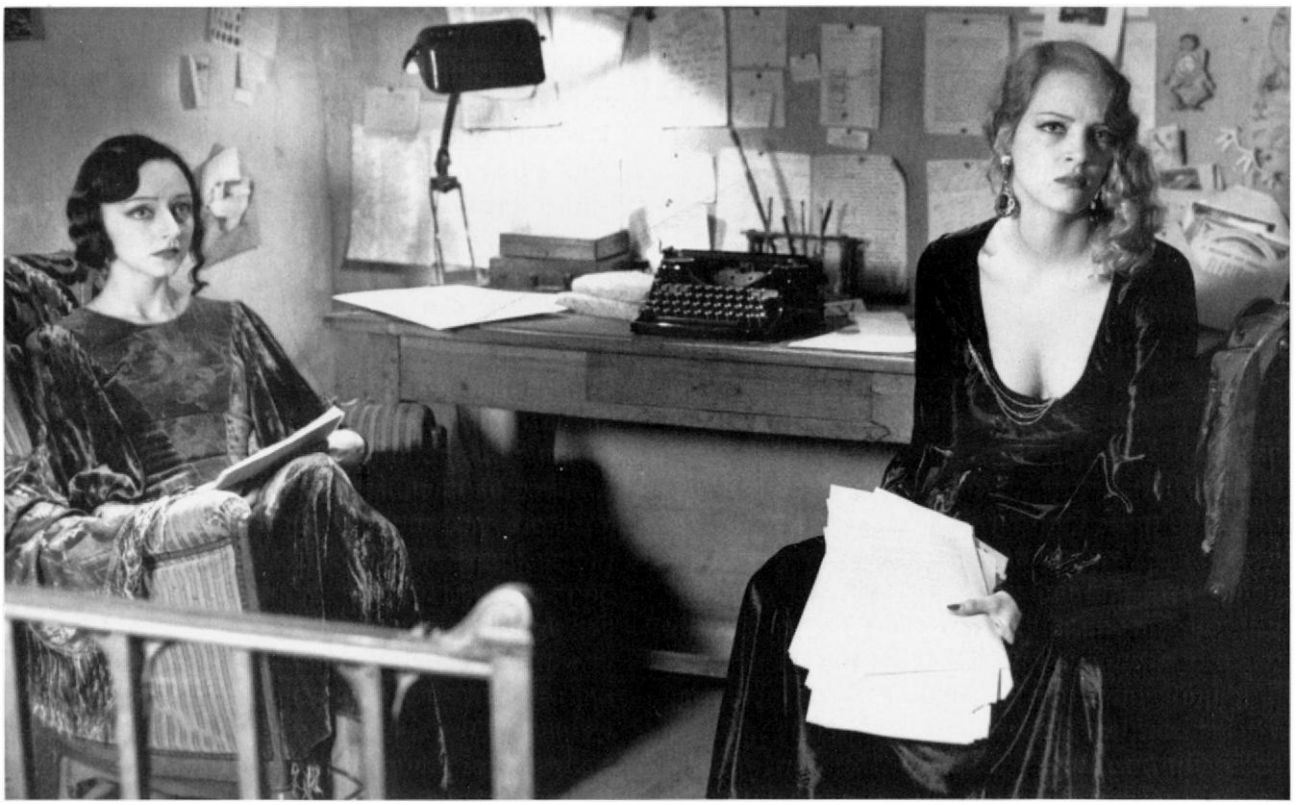
Henry & June

Director: Philip Kaufman. Screenplay: Kaufman and Rose Kaufman. Cinematographer: Philippe Rousselot. Editors: Vivien Hillgrove, William S. Scharf, and Dede Allen. Universal.

Philip Kaufman's fascinating *Henry & June* records the meeting of the expatriate American writer Henry Miller and the French-born prose-poet Anais Nin in Paris in 1931. Miller, who was gathering experiences for his autobiographical novels, and Nin, who had just finished a study of D.H. Lawrence and was deeply into her famous diary, were literary obsessives who were also sexual obsessives, and their collision provided great material for their individual projects. It also provided the material for a great, rowdy comedy of literary and sexual manners, though that's not quite what Kaufman has made here. He's turned the story of Miller and Nin's relationship into something more elusive, mysterious, and complex—a lush, languid fever-dream about characters who are forever turning their lives into art. The movie seems to take place half in and half out of its characters' imaginations; Kaufman allows us to laugh at these infinitely self-absorbed writers but he also tries to pull us into their fantasies and conceits. He is often breathtakingly successful at balancing this inside/outside perspective, remaining sympathetic to his characters' obsessions while at the same time exposing their arrogance and egotism. At times, however, Kaufman loses control of his tone: the movie becomes a bit too languid and indulgent and self-absorbed, and we have to fight our intoxication to retain some perspective on these treacherous, sometimes monstrous narcissists.

In 1930 Miller went to Europe to work on his masterpiece of intellectual, emotional, and sexual exploration, *Tropic of Cancer*. Perpetually out of money and bumming off friends, he found what he needed for his writing in the seamy Paris underworld. Nin, married to a banker but lusting for art-world associations, met Miller through a friend of her husband's. In her diary, which provides the narrative for this movie, she breathlessly recorded his first visit to her home outside the city. According to Nin, she immediately saw in Miller a kindred free spirit: an instinctualist and an experimentalist. In Kaufman's conception the two writers initially couldn't seem more different. Fred Ward's strapping Miller strides into view with a cocksure Yankee swagger; he strikes a match on his shoe, sizes up his hostess with one cocked eyebrow, and lets out a merry cackle. As Ward plays him, Miller is a great roguish life force—a con artist, lusty sensualist, and raconteur. Nin, played by the petite, pretty Portuguese actress Maria de Medeiros (physically just right for the role), is a refined European titmouse nibbling at sexual liberation and bohemianism. Miller's canny glances tell us that he knows exactly what she needs; she blushes and looks away. Their meeting is like the opening of a sly sex farce, which gives Nin's assessment of their intellectual affinity—"He is like me," she says in voice-over—a comic twist. She pretends that she's in love with Miller's mind, but her sensual stare tells us different. We can see the larger truth behind her remark, however: in terms of their sexual and literary voraciousness, these two are a good match. From the very first, their hungry eyes tell us they're eager to take big, juicy bites out of each other.

Kaufman, who shares screenplay credit with his wife, Rose, traces Miller and Nin's developing relationship, and triangulates it with their shared fascination for Miller's wife, June. In the movie, Nin first sees June's face in a photograph pinned to Miller's wall—she stares out with hooded eyes and a dark, knowing smile, and Nin is riveted. Then June turns up as a character in an underground film playing in a Paris dive; Miller is in the audience, tears streaming down his face. June surfaces in Kaufman's movie like a shimmering, pale phantom from the Jungian pit. In that photograph and on film she's disembodied, an object for pure contemplation. When June finally arrives in the flesh, fresh from the sugar daddy in America who supports both her and Miller, Kaufman has built her up into an obsessional force. Her broad Brooklyn accent is a good, rude shock. Kaufman makes us aware of how he has sucked us into the sensual objectifications of Miller and Nin, then he pulls us out with a perfectly placed comic detail.

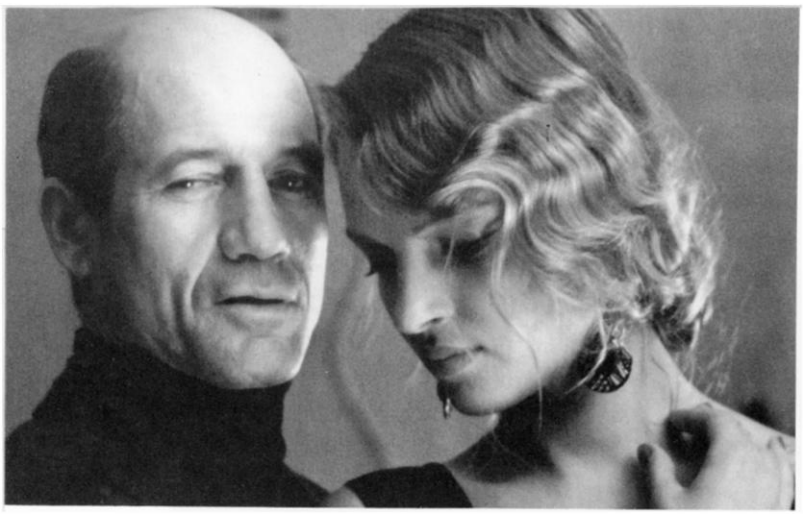


Maria de Medeiros (left) as Anais Nin and Uma Thurman as June

As Kaufman has conceived her and Uma Thurman plays her, June comes on like a feral, snaky bitch-goddess with a creepy vulnerability. She curls cigarette smoke through her blond ringlets, clings to Miller's side, and whispers dirty secrets into his ear. He grins like a Cheshire cat—she's his private muse, his dark spirit. He feeds off her sexual energy for his writing, and she finds fulfillment in his consumption. Nin is instantly jealous. Miller and Nin's relationship starts out as a shared interest in each other's writing, with strong sexual/competitive undercurrents, but when June shows up these undercurrents pop right to the surface. "Have you slept with my husband?" June asks Anais bluntly; soon Nin is demanding that her husband, Hugo (Richard Grant) imagine that she is June when they make love. Square, likeable Hugo is a poor substitute for either Henry or June. He's eager for anything his little titmouse cares to dish up, but Anais wants her own dark spirit. Jealous of Henry, she cries petulantly, "He has someone to drive him to pain and chaos!" Nin's moment of triumph comes when June becomes furious with Henry's fictionalized version of her in his novel. June fancies herself as a tortured Dostoyevski heroine, and when Miller writes her as a scheming and willful little whore she flares up and, in a fit of pique, hauls Anais off to a lesbian bar where they dance drunkenly together.

Kaufman is very funny and assured in these scenes—on the surface they have a deep, creamy lusciousness, but underneath bubble cruder emotions and ruder conflicts. June stirs up the tensions between Anais and Henry, and Kaufman looks on while they slowly stew in their own juices. Finally, June forces a showdown between their overheated imaginations. The two writers argue about who will successfully capture her essence in print, and they actually face off in a crowded bar, where Anais dances a funky solo number as a kind of challenge. She's showing off, flashing her peacock feathers. Henry responds by dragging her behind the stage and shredding her underthings. Afterwards, Nin murmurs to her diary, "I feel so innocent."

This is the rowdiest section of the movie and the actors are often daringly funny. Playing characters who are relentlessly aware of their own roles



Henry (Fred Ward) and June

as unknown literary giant, literary adventuress, and dark muse, Ward, de Medeiros, and Thurman have the satiric devilry that frequently bubbles up in actors playing actors. Ward in particular attacks his character with gusto, slipping among the roles of exuberant bohemian, obsessed great writer, and petulant satyr who can't get it up with a sly aplomb. In some scenes Thurman reclines like a contented pussycat and allows the other actors to bounce off her sexual energy; in others her wounded vanity is pathetic and a little frightening. June is an over-the-top character, but Thurman doesn't embarrass herself—she lets us sort through her character's poses and locate the normal emotional range beneath June's extremes.

The movie begins to lose its ironic perspective shortly after June returns to America, and Miller and Nin plunge into their work and each other. The overlong middle section focuses on Anais as she moves deeper into her own private opium haze. Bouts of lovemaking with Henry and Hugo mingle with scenes of bohemian life from the period. The characters intrude on photography sessions with Brassaï (whose book, *The Secret Paris in the '30s*, helped create the look for *Henry & June*) and the Student Art Ball. They see underground classics like *Un Chien Andalou* and *Maedchen in Uniform* and conduct expeditions into the demimonde. Miller and Nin are writing furiously throughout this section, but, except for a couple of scenes, Kaufman doesn't find a way to effectively dramatize their creativity. He includes stock scenes of Miller at his typewriter and Nin hunched over her diary—scenes familiar from dozens of Hollywoodized artists' bios. Everything becomes filtered through Nin's increasingly self-reflective imagination, including the sex scenes, which grow excessively arty. In particular, we lose our sense of Miller the artist. In the early sections the character is a powerful, amusing presence, but he too becomes absorbed into Nin's fantasies. He turns into an anonymously gyrating bare ass, and Ward loses some of his distinctive grace. I began to feel that I was trapped in one of Nin's druggy erotic novels.

Even when the movie meanders a bit too freely through the mirrored halls of Nin's narcissism, it's never less than marvelous to look at. Philippe Rousselot's cinematography is gorgeously, lushly eroticized, and Kaufman's compositions are meticulous, with jazzy Paris-life scenes contrasting with the bluesy bouts of lovemaking. All of this contributes to the movie's dreamy, obsessive texture. Unfortunately, Kaufman never successfully finds a way to develop that dreamy obsessiveness without blunting his sharp edge. The action comes into focus somewhat near the end, when June returns to Paris and has to cope with both Henry and Anais staking their claim on her, trying to turn her into literature. The love triangle turns into a contest of wills, and poor June, without the intellectual armor of these writer/parasites, doesn't stand a chance. Kaufman manages to clear the mists a bit for this conclusion, but he has already grown too soft on his authors, so we never really feel June's terror of being imaginatively devoured. She becomes a pale phantom again in her final scenes —she leaves the movie as she entered it, an obsessional force. Is this just Henry and Anais's perspective, or Kaufman's as well? Kaufman doesn't seem to know what to do with June's very believable psychological trauma, so she does a discreet fade-out.

The final scenes, in which Anais drives off with Hugo as Henry trails behind on a bicycle, try to recover a jaunty, lighthearted tone that doesn't seem justified. Kaufman may be trying to recapture the spirit of joyful playfulness that infused his last picture, the magnificent *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and that also kept his epic *The Right Stuff* funny and buoyant. But the material here doesn't allow it. Henry Miller and Anais Nin are fascinating characters, but finally too irritatingly self-obsessed to allow for the kind of emotional richness that we've come to expect from Kaufman.

STEVE WARRICK

▪ Steve Warrick is a film critic for the *C-Ville Review* in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Paris Is Burning

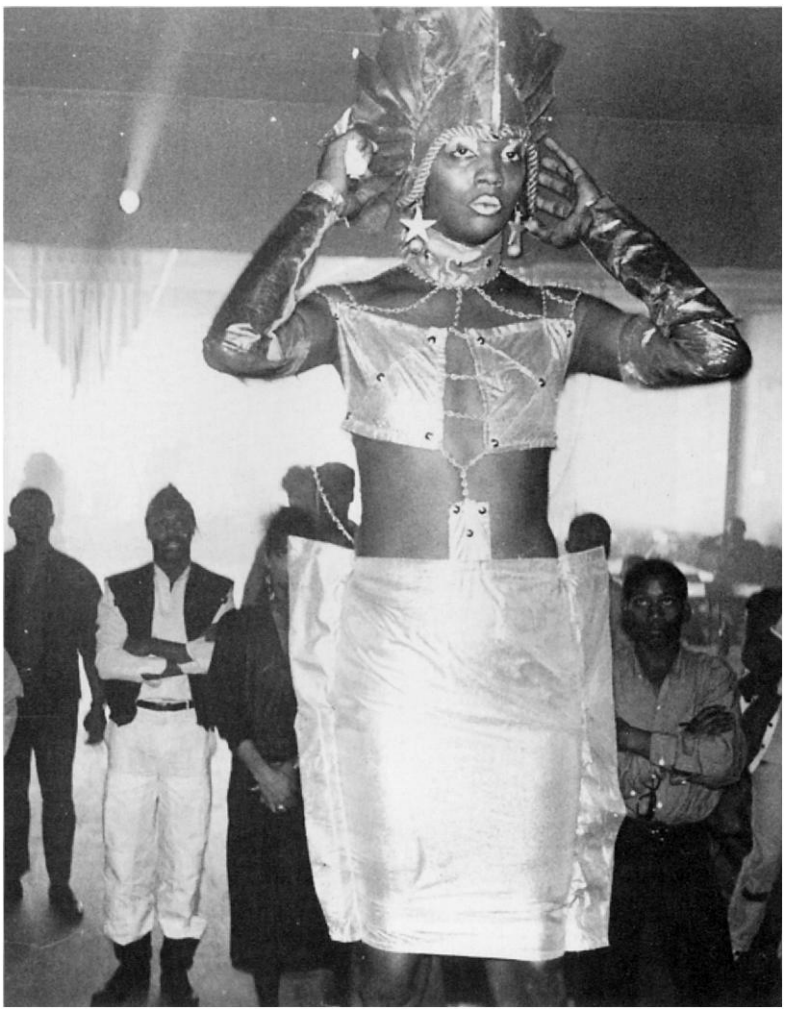
Producer and Director: Jennie Livingston. Co-Producer: Barry Swimar. Editor: Jonathan Oppenheim. Cinematographer: Paul Gibson. An Off-White Productions Release.

If ever a film seemed to demand a pull quote like "hilarious and moving," *Paris Is Burning* is that film, and it is only fitting that a review of Jennie Livingston's splendid documentary should begin with a familiar phrase enlivened by quotation marks. *Paris Is Burning* is above all a rich cinematic experience that elicits as wide a range of emotional responses from the viewer as any film to appear in recent years; the fact that its subjects are drag balls in Harlem and the black gay subculture of which they are the flagship events may also suggest how much of its appeal is to be found in the play of parody and artifice. Indeed, one of the most remarkable things about the stars of this film is their ability to identify degrees of invention and style that are all but invisible to the uninitiated. Such discernment, we quickly learn, is the bitter reward of a life lived by necessity outside of mainstream society; and it is to the director's credit that she is able to make this relationship between exclusion and imagination into a structuring principle of her film, as well as a source of much exuberance and pathos.

At first glance, however, the insights of the various people who are interviewed over the course of the film are such that little inventiveness seems necessary on the part of the director. From the opening frames, articulate voices explain that, being black *and* gay, they carry a double burden in a society which discriminates against both, that they must have an extraordinary amount of strength to cope with such hostility, and that mutual support and a sense of collective identity help them to do so. Sometimes these voices accompany handheld shots of extravagantly attired contestants at the balls; sometimes they are heard in the form of direct interviews with aging "legends" or young aspirants, who take us through the basics of subcultural life. These include, among other things, a hermetic vocabulary, the main terms of which are introduced in Godardian fashion with the help of large, measured intertitles. In this case, however, such calculated disruption owes more to the strategies of pop mythmaking than it does to Brechtian estrangement theory and merely offers a cinematic complement to the in-your-face manner of the participants themselves.

It is only some distance into the film that we begin to notice the subtle ways that the director has found to bring out the various ironies of her subjects' lives. For example, Willi Ninja, a success story in a world that offers no obvious *carrière ouverte aux talents*, numbers among his many commercially viable enterprises the instruction of would-be runway models from local neighborhoods. City life, he observes, makes girls hard; it is his job to teach them to exploit their "feminine wiles." Yet the effect of everything we have seen up to this point has been to throw into question the status of such blandly traditional gender characterizations. To the viewer of *Paris Is Burning*, it comes as no surprise that this man should have a more acute grasp of femininity than most women. And in a different but related vein is the case of Venus Xtravaganza, who is 15 years old at the time that we first see her. Here too the film-maker's

Paris Is Burning: contestant at a drag ball



efforts are directed toward revealing her subject through the temporal and cumulative dimension of cinema. First, Venus is introduced at the peak of her form as one of the most glamorous stars in the imaginary firmament of the balls. Then, little by little, we get her story: having left her embarrassed parents, she managed to find ways to survive, although she insists that the gifts she receives are not for sex—at least 95 percent of the time they aren't. From her we also learn some of the most characteristic aspirations in the film, all of which center on the impossible desire to be "a spoiled, rich, white girl." Apart from this soap-opera fantasy, Venus's fondest dream is to leave New York, settle down, devote herself to her man, and generally become "a complete woman." Later we see her working the West Side piers, and by the end of the film she has been found strangled in a seedy hotel room. At this point, her "mother" reveals that Venus was actually among the most reckless of her children.

The stark contrast between the utter conventionality of Venus's imagination (which nevertheless did not prevent her from transforming herself in extraordinary ways) and the grim facts of her unhappy life reflects, in its most agonizingly naive form, a paradox that runs throughout the film and indeed throughout the phenomenon of subcultures in general. Much recent work on this subject has emphasized the ways that subcultures offer strategies of resistance to the pressures of an aggressively market-oriented or otherwise discriminatory society, and this is as it should be. At the same time, the political dimension of most subcultural activity differs crucially from traditional left-wing politics in that it lacks an openly announced utopian vision. Instead of actually trying to *change* the world according to the dictates of a more rational or humane paradigm, subcultural behavior merely aims at survival with a measure of autonomy ("As you get older," remarks one matronly personage ruminating on life, you feel you're doing all right "if you just get through it"). Moreover, because this project usually involves some refinement on the level of style, subcultural activity is locked into a symbiotic relationship with the dominant culture, whose conventions are implicitly invoked, only to be invested with new meaning, by the various creative innovations that define the subculture. Ironically, the dominant culture itself is often renewed through the eventual reappropriation, packaging, and sale of those innovations (as with the black gay dance style called "voguing," now an accessory of pop stars like Madonna).

What, then, could be more paradoxical, and yet somehow exemplary, than a subculture that celebrates the fanatically precise imitation of the stylistic mainstream? For this is exactly what the term "realness" connotes in the world of the balls. Thus, we are introduced to such categories as "executive realness" (suit, briefcase, horn-rimmed glasses) and "schoolboy/schoolgirl realness" (loafers, tartans, notebook clutched against the chest), while other young men are shown strutting about in military dress, as if auditioning for a recruiting ad. Such quotidian verisimilitude is a relatively recent development in the history of drag, and at one point a veteran briefly laments the decline of sequins and peacock feathers—competition has become so fierce, it seems, that this new and exquisitely subtle aesthetic has eclipsed the older, more blatant forms of outrageousness. Now the ultimate measure of success is to be able to walk out of a ball and into the crowd on the street without being identified and bashed. Yet this is not a gay equivalent of passing (a trophy in the category of executive realness does not make one an executive), but rather a way of refining one's difference from the mainstream to the point where the signs of that difference have been totally effaced and it assumes a kind of real existence. The irony is that the very real experience of difference, the heightened awareness that it brings, should help to create a disguise so immaculate that nothing remains but the in-joke of one's private knowledge.

Nevertheless, if the concept of realness seems like a figure for the relationship that all subcultures have with the dominant culture—at once a remarkably subtle form of distancing and a tacit acknowledgement of dependence—it also presents a cinematic opportunity that *Paris Is Burning* exploits brilliantly. At two different points in the film, shots of "ordinary" New Yorkers are juxtaposed with footage of the balls; the second of these is particularly effective and repays close scrutiny. Accompanied by a voice-over describing the ways that straight white people dominate the imagery of success in American culture, the camera follows an elaborately coiffed woman on the street. This shot is immediately succeeded by another, showing a

similarly well-dressed woman, and then several more of men in business suits. Response to this sequence will vary from audience to audience; however, in every case there will be a moment when the majority of viewers assumes that these people are all gay men, followed by a moment of disoriented self-correction (such is the destabilizing force of the milieu—on one occasion while shooting the film, Livingston was herself mistaken for a man and complimented on her realness). For some, both moments will pass before the image of the first woman leaves the screen, whereas others will not abandon their initial assumption until the images of the businessmen appear. But no matter how quickly one catches on, the effect is the same: we are nudged into a recognition that every human appearance is a construct and that all of us are, whether we know it or not, playing an elaborate dress-up game in which questions of power and desire are at stake. The more real the executive, the more he suddenly looks like a drag queen.

Perhaps, then, the most impressive achievement of this film is its ability to suggest how much the world of balls reveals about American culture without in any way diminishing the uniqueness of that world. When an insider asserts passionately that you can tell from the way a contestant wears his outfit whether it was bought or stolen, his claim is both ineffable and touching in its desire for legitimacy, here as elsewhere defined as purchasing power. One feels intuitively that no other group could have produced such a comment, yet its motivation remains recognizable. At the same time, if the ruthless competition of the balls sometimes reminds us uneasily of the world outside their doors, it is nonetheless a contest ameliorated by creativity and fought on a battlefield of the imagination. Early in the film Willi Ninja demonstrates a dance in which he pretends to make himself up and then finishes by turning the mirror on his adversary. Doubly excluded from the American dream, the stars of *Paris Is Burning* hold the mirror up to society with refreshing insouciance, and Jennie Livingston has offered them a tribute that matches the ingeniousness of their own fabrications. For all of its hardships, what we are shown is indeed "the gay life." GARY HENTZI

▪ Gary Hentzi teaches at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

Jungle Fever

Writer/Director: Spike Lee. Producers: Monty Ross and Lee. Cinematographer: Ernest Dickerson. Editor: Sam Pollard. Music: Stevie Wonder and Terence Blanchard. Universal.

Spike Lee developed his skills in independent movie making and music videos, working his way up to become an American *auteur*—perhaps not quite ready to be an artistic successor to Woody Allen, but ready to enter the social and political space left by Costa-Gavras and Godard, and in racial issues to locate himself somewhere between Eddie Murphy and Malcolm X. In other words, Lee is hard to pin down. Perhaps of all his work so far *Jungle Fever* is the hardest to locate. Lee's filmic style is a kind of slowed-down MTV, an assemblage of fragments which present his social concerns broadly and unanalytically. As an entertainer he mastered the attack language of pop music and night-club comedy and adapted it with persistence and ambition to interracial and intraracial issues. Some serious reviewers have rejected *Jungle Fever*, first for Lee's apparent scorn for integration, second for his misreading of black-white relationships, and third for his creation of bad art. They find the love relationship in the film to be superficial: the interracial affair between a black man and a white woman is dismissive, and the whole issue of interracial relationships is treated too harshly. Because the affair doesn't work out and the two lovers split at the end of the film to go back to their neighborhoods (Bensonhurst and Harlem) Lee seems despairing and separatist, and in fact appears to attack integration in the manner of the black nationalists of the sixties—but without their heroism.

The answer to this criticism may lie in Lee's use of social types from the African-American and white worlds. Neither Lee's talent nor interest point toward character in depth; in flat panels he raises the racial and ethnic types who make up his story. The audience can hardly help but notice that the plot in *Jungle Fever* is a mockup of *Romeo and Juliet* by way of *West Side Story*; in this case culture-and-race-crossed lovers represent not some Renaissance notion of the individual creative romantic self but racial and ethnic stances. There is

similarly well-dressed woman, and then several more of men in business suits. Response to this sequence will vary from audience to audience; however, in every case there will be a moment when the majority of viewers assumes that these people are all gay men, followed by a moment of disoriented self-correction (such is the destabilizing force of the milieu—on one occasion while shooting the film, Livingston was herself mistaken for a man and complimented on her realness). For some, both moments will pass before the image of the first woman leaves the screen, whereas others will not abandon their initial assumption until the images of the businessmen appear. But no matter how quickly one catches on, the effect is the same: we are nudged into a recognition that every human appearance is a construct and that all of us are, whether we know it or not, playing an elaborate dress-up game in which questions of power and desire are at stake. The more real the executive, the more he suddenly looks like a drag queen.

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Jungle Fever

Writer/Director: Spike Lee. Producers: Monty Ross and Lee. Cinematographer: Ernest Dickerson. Editor: Sam Pollard. Music: Stevie Wonder and Terence Blanchard. Universal.

Spike Lee developed his skills in independent movie making and music videos, working his way up to become an American *auteur*—perhaps not quite ready to be an artistic successor to Woody Allen, but ready to enter the social and political space left by Costa-Gavras and Godard, and in racial issues to locate himself somewhere between Eddie Murphy and Malcolm X. In other words, Lee is hard to pin down. Perhaps of all his work so far *Jungle Fever* is the hardest to locate. Lee's filmic style is a kind of slowed-down MTV, an assemblage of fragments which present his social concerns broadly and unanalytically. As an entertainer he mastered the attack language of pop music and night-club comedy and adapted it with persistence and ambition to interracial and intraracial issues. Some serious reviewers have rejected *Jungle Fever*, first for Lee's apparent scorn for integration, second for his misreading of black-white relationships, and third for his creation of bad art. They find the love relationship in the film to be superficial: the interracial affair between a black man and a white woman is dismissive, and the whole issue of interracial relationships is treated too harshly. Because the affair doesn't work out and the two lovers split at the end of the film to go back to their neighborhoods (Bensonhurst and Harlem) Lee seems despairing and separatist, and in fact appears to attack integration in the manner of the black nationalists of the sixties—but without their heroism.

The answer to this criticism may lie in Lee's use of social types from the African-American and white worlds. Neither Lee's talent nor interest point toward character in depth; in flat panels he raises the racial and ethnic types who make up his story. The audience can hardly help but notice that the plot in *Jungle Fever* is a mockup of *Romeo and Juliet* by way of *West Side Story*; in this case culture-and-race-crossed lovers represent not some Renaissance notion of the individual creative romantic self but racial and ethnic stances. There is

no lyric here but rather a desultory passionate moment, an experiment in cross-race sex, followed by confusion and regret. Without the intensity or complexity of their literary ancestors, the lovers play an ensemble role together with others in the film who also make a strong claim upon our attention and are portrayed just as sharply and just as superficially.

In this context the film would therefore seem to fail. But my point is that the love story is a pseudo-theme designed to present race relationships and stereotypes, a cleverly ironic frame designed to dismiss traditional romance, to point out its irrelevance. The real theme of *Jungle Fever* is, in fact, the power and persistence of racial oppression; the film argues that the chief issue for blacks is the amelioration of their condition, to which other issues must be subordinated. This theme is distributed in the film in curious ways: it does not move toward a single overwhelming point, nor does it unify a variety of interrelated points. The love story plays no better or more unifying part than any other story within the film. Lee's concern transcends "romance"; he has little use for idealized sexual relationships in the face of vital economic and political needs—his crude verb for sexual intercourse is "to bone." This cynical attitude about romance is certainly not new for him; it was thoroughly developed in *She's Gotta Have It*, where it was a form of domination.

It is a mistake to accuse Lee of failing to develop the love story in *Jungle Fever* or even give it time to mature; he even rejects the tradition of secrecy between lovers. The affair is almost immediately evident to both the black and the white families and friends of the lovers. The social matrix takes precedence over intimate romance, making the sexual affair a localized social disaster and not a personal event. The lovers only succeed in dramatizing the incommensurability of the white and black worlds of New York, typified by white Bensonhurst and black Harlem. And Lee wants it that way. He could have chosen Greenwich Village as the scene of an affair with which to examine the subtle personal pressures that touch mixed-race couples; but that was not his story. The subjects of this decentered film are instead the black condition, the drug-riddled poor, the continuing economic disaster of a devastated Harlem, and the problems of the black middle class, whose con-

Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes, left) and his best friend (Spike Lee)

fused and uneasy black professionals (the hero is a talented architect) are inescapably caught up in the realities of racism. Flipper Purify, played by Wesley Snipes, works for a glitzy white firm while in Harlem the houses are falling down. He is dissociated from his surroundings even though he chooses to live in Harlem. His romance with an Italian-American temp-secretary is halfhearted, hardly a challenge to his marriage. The film opens with a highly charged sex scene between Flipper and his wife, played by Lonette McKee, and in its heat there is no implication that the hero is jaded, or suffering a midlife crisis—he is clearly happily married, and the subsequent "boning" of the white woman performed upon his architect's drafting table becomes an act of curiosity for both characters and of cynical social commentary on Lee's part. In setting up this situation Lee is not critical of black professionals only; the social and economic background of the affair is part of its foreground. He is insisting that the black condition takes precedence at this time and place over personal issues.

Yet Lee's obvious manipulative traits, his conceit, his MTV personality, his money-making commercials with Michael Jordan, his presuming to be a spokesman for blacks, distort the perception of his movie. He neither analyzes the black condition with care, nor does he reveal much compassion for it. He appears to lack the high seriousness that characterized earlier spokesmen for African-American causes; writers like Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, and Eldridge Cleaver were intensely analytic, and presented the issues in sharply focused works. Lee's world is cool, eclectic, and despairing, its focus wanders; it suggests a cynical yet dismayed withdrawal from situation similar to television commercials that show young African Americans playing basketball on brick courts in city ghettos wearing impossibly expensive Nikes.

Lee's cynicism, his lack of focus, of unity, is the key to his special effect as film-maker. He is often under attack for not doing what he does not intend to do, while what he does achieve is misunderstood. Unlike Woody Allen, he does not focus upon a single complicated protagonist who represents contemporary dilemmas. Allen's strongly centered, highly unified work reflects the modernist traditions of Bergman and Fellini, but Lee's work celebrates the despair and pleasure attendant upon disunity. *Jungle Fever* is loosely connected, decentered; it portrays the black condition in one anecdote after another containing characters who surface and disappear like offshore rocks. An example is Flipper's family: his brother, played beautifully by Samuel Jackson, is a drug addict who will do virtually anything short of murder to find his fix; but the incidents which lead to his death at the hands of his father have virtually nothing to do with the hero's interracial fling. The father is also a story in himself (in a perhaps too easy performance by Ossie Davis): a rigidly religious preacher bitter over the black condition but unable to do anything about it. The tentative romantic subplot involving the secretary's ex-boyfriend and an intellectual black woman comments on the difficulty encountered by successful black women—they turn to white men rather than "ordinary" black men, since there aren't enough successful black males to go around and since black males are intimidated by successful black women. Thus another off-focus aspect of the film explores the plight of black women of achievement who feel emotionally, sexually isolated—a gathering in which black women unload their complaints is perhaps the film's funniest scene. Lee's anecdotal method differs here from the multiple-story form familiar to us in movies and on TV, in films like *Towering Inferno* or *Airport* (one may call it "The *Grand Hotel* Method"), because this form is designed to explore character, as superficial and stereotyped as that character might be. Lee's point is social and not individual, and his loose structure is a mockery of plot. The final incident, a stereotypical freeze frame, depicts the hero embracing in anguish a black teenage junkie hooker, confronting the black condition from which he has been escaping through personal ambition and cross-racial dalliance. The hero has passed the hooker at various points in the film, so the final shot comes as no great shock in itself—what is shocking is that the hero's sudden tortured outburst completely shatters any notion of his character we may have gleaned from the film. This scene cannot be explained logically by the glimmer of plot which supports it; although Flipper has witnessed the failure of his interracial affair and the murder of his dope-addict brother by his father, he has given no hint of the emotional resources needed for his explosive reaction.

Families: (above) John Turturro (left) and Anthony Quinn;
(left) Ruby Dee and Samuel Jackson

Lee seems incapable of making a straightforward statement about the social and political issues he depicts. His juxtaposition of anecdotes defines no particular stance, no unified vision. Those who want a definite statement such as "Fight the power" will not find it, because Lee is himself divided about the nature of the struggle. He will not and perhaps cannot embrace an ideology. He inhabits an aimless political space. As Robert Chrisman says of *Do the Right Thing*: "Lee's inability to present a coherent value system in the replication of black life in his films raises the question, indeed, what is the right thing?"[1] It is too easy to claim that *Jungle Fever* raises significant questions; questions must be asked in coherent and significant ways. Lee's assemblage of anecdotes prevents him from entering deeply into any one of them. The very structure of his work is against analysis and for surfaces. With an entertainer's despair of depth and delight in types and observation, he gives us sketches of men and women in the context of a racist society. These are types but not, with the exception of a few misses here and there (Flipper's bosses and his mother), stereotypes. Flipper and his wife are not stereotypes; Flipper's brother transcends stereotype as a drug addict like a virtuoso musician transcends a night-club hack.

Essentially, then, the film is episodic, a combination of burlesque and street theater brought into the multi-million dollar milieu of a nineties

film. It is relentlessly popular in its quest for effects, in its shtick. Incidents in the film stand out and apart from each other as if they were culled from different films. The astounding scene in the Taj Mahal crack house is dreamlike and expressionistic; the scenes between the bible-thumping father and his family are melodramatic family drama; the scenes involving the Italian fathers (who are comically similar, though Anthony Quinn's portrait is more accomplished) are farcical; the scene in which the hero's wife throws his possessions from the window of their apartment is an adaptation of Lee's communal street scenes in *Do the Right Thing*. *Jungle Fever* is decentered in plot, in filmic style, and ultimately in tone.

The film's tone—comic, angry, cynical, turgid, ridiculous, melodramatic, despairing—is its most vital aspect. This tone is decentered in the sense that it neither knows itself nor proceeds from a unified authorial identity; it is not so much ambiguous as it is vaporized in the multiple stories and styles of the film. The special quality that distinguishes *Jungle Fever* from other postmodern films like *Blue Velvet* or *Crimes and Misdemeanors* in which the tone is at bottom despairing is the film's socio-political message, which ultimately cannot permit the wry, cynical helplessness of Lynch's and Allen's films. There is always a reformer's hope in even the darkest political films, and this is true of *Jungle Fever*. Lee's achievement is to combine an unfocused construction of contingencies with serious political satire. His work cannot be characterized as a monolith but rather as a sprawling and varied city. Such combinations would seem to be self-canceling, but in this case the result is an unsettling comedy which demands that Americans make room for diversity, for the multiplicity of otherness. Amid his pop sociology and artistic excesses, Lee demonstrates a thoroughly contemporary consciousness and the ability to put it on film.

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1. "What Is the Right Thing? Notes on the Deconstruction of Black Ideology," *The Black Scholar*, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 57.

Wild at Heart

Director: David Lynch. Screenplay: Lynch, based on a novel by Barry Gifford. Cinematographer: Frederick Elmes. Editor: Duwayne Dunham. Music: Angelo Badalamenti. The Samuel Goldwyn Company.

Apparently, no one ever instructed David Lynch in the rules that govern what a work of art should be—the forms it should take, the boundaries it should honor—let alone the accepted truisms on what a modern audience expects in return for its admission. But through a serendipitous (and fairly mystifying) configuration of the Zeitgeist, Lynch has emerged as one of the few American directors with the popular sanction to do what he pleases. Despite his sudden celebrity, though, he remains oblivious to both critical and commercial commonplaces. We should be grateful for such intractability. For without it no film-maker would have had the nerve to put something as unremittingly sordid and black and plain messy as *Wild at Heart* on the screen, and that would be a loss. Lynch's latest production is an ugly/beautiful epic of conspicuous excess, a work whose excitement—like that of Picasso's *Guernica* or the Beatles' White Album—is tied in with its inability to control itself. The film pops the seams of a threadbare plot with the kind of overheated invention that art's traditional prosceniums cannot always comfortably contain and that pays no obeisance to the internal limits we carry with us always, not least when we walk into a theater.

This is a road movie, supposedly. That wouldn't be worth noting except that the road traveled by Sailor Ripley (Nicolas Cage) and Lula Fortune (Laura Dern) is ultimately left littered with bodies, or parts of bodies. The violence is engendered by the evil machinations of Lula's mother, Marietta (Diane Ladd), a blonde gorgon with an unholy hatred of Sailor, who once spurned her advances; she vows his death and her daughter's rescue. Among those she enlists in their pursuit is a detective, Johnny Farragut (Harry Dean Stanton); a mobster, Marcello Santos (J. E. Freeman); his boss, Mr. Reindeer (W. Morgan Sheppard); a band of roving assassins with a voodoo fetish (David Patrick Kelly, Calvin Lockhart, Grace Zabriskie); and finally a black-shirted, brown-toothed ex-

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Marine named Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe). People die along this road, and at the side of the road; people die even in the flashbacks illustrating the postcoital confabs of Sailor and Lula. There is a rape, and a near rape. Vomit rots on the floor, and flies gather to it. A dog trundles off with a man's hand gripped lovingly in its maw. Demolished heads and flaming bodies are leitmotifs.

For blood and curses, brutalities and abnormalities of every stripe, no film in recent memory can touch *Wild at Heart*—Lynch has fashioned one enormous alienation effect. But as sometimes happens (*GoodFellas* is another recent example), a surfeit of pure energy has resulted in a work that, although excessive and often repellent, actually succeeds in awakening the senses rather than smothering them. In indulging his taste for violence and depravity, Lynch intensifies one's feel for what they cost, and what it means for these characters to survive them. It is the cinematic equivalent of hard-core punk rock, of what Greil Marcus (in his book *Lipstick Traces*) writes of hearing in the animal screech of Sex Pistol Johnny Rotten: "A voice that denied all social facts, and in that denial affirmed that everything was possible." Of course, the other side of Lynch's polymorphous perversities or the Sex Pistols' rants about death camps and abortions is that eventually we feel like asking the artist: Now that the old restraints (but also structures, guidelines) are smashed, what do you have to replace them? (This may be what David Ansen meant when he complained that *Wild at Heart* lacked the "still, watchful center" common to Lynch's previous work: without self-censorship, there are no rules.) But this lack of restraint is precisely what is radical and thrilling about the movie, particularly as it relates to the mainstream of American commercial film: that still, watchful center—the focus of narrative control—is not merely absent, but cruelly, significantly absent. Lynch wants to find the point at which a viewer of reasonable intelligence and sensitivity will say, "No more"—and then go past it.

His methods of offending the audience come, in various measures, out of Dada, the Theatre of Cruelty, Abstract Expressionism (form subsuming content), and "the poetic cinema of shock," in Susan Sontag's phrase. Each of these schools and movements sought to defy the dominant artistic impulse of the ages—namely, to contrive a highly formalized, highly conscious art—in favor of another art, one whose key determinants were not Aristotle's *Poetics* but the encoded play of a dreaming mind and the subterranean demands of the human body. In film, the progenitors of the poetic cinema of shock (which include such works as *Un Chien Andalou, Freaks,* and *Scorpio Rising*, and among whose descendants are Lynch's own *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet*) took the ideals of beauty and truth, of poetry itself, crossed them with images of mutilation, deformity, and decadence, and found that beauty and truth could not only survive but thrive on them, triggering new associations and responses. That is what Lynch —like Luis Buñuel, Tod Browning, and Kenneth Anger—wants to replace those smashed restraints with: the power of art to shock and poeticize, and the capacity of an audience to respond to both.

None of this means anything if the horrors Lynch conceives aren't compelling, erotic, bottomless in their imagistic strength, like Anger's Walpurgis party or Browning's nightcrawling freaks with knives in their mouths. But in fact most of them are, starting with the flames that back the opening credits: it's not often that we see fire onscreen that carries such hellish sensuality. (Here the morbid portents are goosed along by the music of Richard Strauss; elsewhere this function is served by the hothouse melodrama of Angelo Badalamenti.) The heat coming off those flames—so apparently meaningless, yet so fully, intensely observed—cues an understanding of the direction the film will take. Nearly as much as *Eraserhead*, *Wild at Heart* relies on its visuals, rather than on dialogue or the mechanics of narrative, to define the contours of a nightmare that is both inside of and external to the characters. The first sequence spells this out in the most emphatic manner imaginable, treating the audience to an outbreak of violence as scabrous and disturbing—and as bracing—as anything in the collected works of Scorsese or Peckinpah, and all before the characters or their relationships have been defined.

The young lovers descend a staircase in some gilded ballroom. Sailor is accosted by a thug, Bobby Ray Lemon (Gregg Dandridge), who, it transpires, is the first of Marietta's hired assassins. The henchman makes salacious references to Lula's sexuality, and as the insults spiral Sailor glowers from underneath hedgerow eyebrows like a

Kubrick psycho. Bobby Ray pulls a knife. Lula screams in warning. Sailor throws the *provocateur* against a wall, then the floor, and proceeds to introduce his head to the marble until blood and brains speck the surfaces. His fury spent, Sailor lights a cigarette and points a finger/pistol at Marietta.

What makes this brief sequence so terribly alive—both on the screen and in the memory—is not merely the ferocity of the physical action (you tense yourself against the bullet that will surely exit Sailor's finger), but that of the film-making, which thunders past the sort of action-movie pyrotechnics it superficially resembles. The violence is both painfully realistic and obviously hyperrealistic, at once stark and exaggerated. Sailor's murderous outburst—hands grabbing lapels, limbs flying—is punctuated by a torrent of slashing electric guitar (those Sex Pistols again) and a quick zoom of the camera (which achieves a striking reverse 3-D effect, pulling the viewer into the action rather than pouring the action from the screen). The immediate excitement may manifest itself in a heady blood rush, or even in a measured, entirely aesthetic response: the sequence is beautifully shot, brilliantly edited. But at the same time, something deeper and more unsettling is at work: a notion we can't evade, an implicit promise Lynch is making about how death will come in this story, a threat that will infuse and haunt the remainder of the film. In this world, death is either sudden and unspeakable or protracted and unspeakable, but it is always free of metaphorical baggage, always stripped to the primal essentials of blood, meat, and bone. The pitiless shots of Bobby Ray Lemon's dented skull take us to the point at which, to quote founding Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck, "Death ceases to be an escape of the soul from earthly misery and becomes a vomiting, screaming, and choking." Already the world is revealed as a charnel house, and the doors have been locked behind us.

There are three other, more extensive sequences in which Lynch mounts, with equal imaginative power, his vision of hell on earth. Riding through the midnight black of a Southwestern highway, Sailor and Lula encounter a roadside wreck and its lone survivor (Sherilyn Fenn). The young woman expresses an exquisite panic over having lost her personal effects, all the time scratching absently at the hole in her head. The absence of sense, of control, is accentuated by the handheld camera (a device Lynch seldom uses), which tracks her as she stumbles in and out of the wreckage, screaming at her mother so that she might retain some connection with the life she is on the verge of leaving. Here again, death is removed from the realm of the romantic and the sensical and transported to that of the purely physical, the unreasonable, the arbitrary. But for all of the scene's eerie detachment (Peter Travers refers to Lynch's "nonjudgmental wonder"), the director's art is a transforming presence: it crouches like Grendel in the contemptuous darkness, the dust twisting in the headlight beams.

The execution of Johnny Farragut is a truly horrific sequence; although it threatens to cross the border into hysterical comedy (and some feel that it makes good on the threat), Lynch shoots it too tight and loud and immediate to allow such easy distanciation. As Johnny sits bound and gagged, the three killers sent by Santos to dispatch the inconvenient detective flail and shriek in the throes of a sexual ecstasy, clearly enacting a well-rehearsed ritual. By far the most exotically dangerous of the trio is Grace Zabriskie's Juana: when she first materializes from the shadows of Mr. Reindeer's whorehouse—wearing a short blond wig and a death's-head cosmetic job, a twisted cane supporting a clubfoot and mangled leg—she is recognizable as the *lusus naturae* of David Lynch's worst nightmare. She becomes ours as well: screaming full into the camera —at us—she represents as directly as anything in film history one artist's imagined face of death. A sickening sort of climax is reached, and the gun is leveled at hapless Johnny's head. The trigger is pulled; the blast issues. Cut to a road sign full of buckshot holes.

(This edit recalls the meanest trick Buñuel ever played: setting up the mutilation of an eye, cutting to a shot of the moon bisected by a passing cloud —allowing us to accept this, with relief, as a "metaphor"—and then going back to the eye and the carnage. This is the one time Lynch doesn't go as far as his predecessor.)

The decimated highway sign heralds Big Tuna, Texas, and the end of the road for Sailor and Lula. This hole-in-the-wall hamlet proves to be a grimy, corrosive inferno where the demonic spirit that has

inspired and overseen the previous deaths springs to life for the last time, in the form of Bobby Peru. He is certainly not as exotic as Zabriskie's supernatural Other—grease, cowboy boots, bolo tie, the grin of a malicious child—but he makes a forcefully repugnant sensualist. His defining moment —and another of the film's grotesquely transcendent images—comes when he plays a cat-and-mouse game in which he assumes both roles. Caressing the frightened Lula in a shabby motel room, Peru promises to leave if she will ask him to fuck her; she refuses. Moving closer, he performs what amounts to a soliloquy that is made up of two words: "Fuck me." He says it again and again and again, in tones that vary subtly but perceptibly—threatening, cajoling, pleading, promising—and each reiteration tightens the grip of this confusing, unfamiliar mood. It is held for an unbearable stretch, and for its duration we have nothing to hear but those two words (". . . fuck me, ffffuck me, *fuck* me . . ."), nothing to see but close shots of hands, thighs, quivering mouths, all bathed in honey-colored afternoon sunlight. Of course it's perverse, of course it makes a viewer feel dirty; this is a rape scene. But I wasn't being rhetorical in calling it transcendent. It literally takes you beyond yourself, beyond anything resembling an assumed, thoughtless response. Here is the terror of moral anarchy: that this evil seduction should not be merely repulsive (which it is), but also, perhaps, a little . . . erotic? The ugliness is undeniable, but the style provokes feelings beyond automatic, encroaching on the realm of fantasy, prying into unknown corners of the brain, combining revulsion and attraction in uncommon permutations. Lynch goes past merely showing the effects of moral anarchy on his characters; in this scene particularly, he visits it upon us as well, and the implications can be frightening.

"Fuck me!"—Laura Dern and Willem Dafoe

Art that actually reaches beneath the conscious level—as against that which merely feels around its fringes—is rare, and it may be for this reason that many have difficulty adopting new criteria to deal with it. It seems to me unfortunate that *Wild at Heart*, which clearly doesn't pretend to the formalism and immaculate conception of, say, Woody Allen's objets d'art, has yet been judged by essentially the same standards, and inevitably has been found wanting. Example: Kathleen Murphy, writing in *Film Comment*, decries Lynch's apparent refusal to bestow his people with "character evolution," "dramatic will," "spontaneity." Forget it: Lynch has always favored the sensual over the sensical. Each of his personal films lacks the conventional narrative emphases, and the components Murphy misses are merely cogs in the machinery of dramaturgy that Lynch eschews. In *Wild at Heart*, the narrative is deliberately "unacceptable," if not nonexistent. In another film, more grounded in the traditions of classical story craft, the logical omissions of Lynch's script would be glaring and unforgivable. Once his scenes are over, what happens to Marcello Santos? What about Mr. Reindeer? Bobby Peru's girlfriend? What is Lula up to during the five years of Sailor's second jail term, aside from having a baby? So damn many loose ends! But if the film reaches you, the loose ends and departures from common narrative wisdom feel like textural necessities more than aesthetic liabilities. Were they to disappear, the film would be cleaner, more routinely satisfying, less threatening, and all but useless. Most of the film's strongest moments are, in a formal respect, utterly tangential to the requirements of story logic; they

operate as particularizations of Lynch's vision rather than the succeeding steps on fiction's staircase. Thus, at its best, the picture stands in radical opposition to the most basic assumptions of what constitutes a feature-length piece of commercial cinema, and functions as a critique of meaning over impact, of cause over effect. Even to label it a "road movie" is to link it, as if by fiat, to a false and arbitrary heritage; to require "character evolution" of Sailor and Lula, as if they were figures in Strindberg or people existing in some reasonable facsimile of the real world, is at best impertinent. *Wild at Heart* divorces itself from the conventions of psychological realism by its unconventional method—anti-narrative, anti-metaphor—and overpowers them by its impact. Surely this is what Manny Farber had in mind when he wrote of how "Criticism can subjugate the bestiality of the screen image by breaking it down into arbitrary but easily managed elements . . . that bring the movie within the doctoring talents of the critic." Except that in the case of *Wild at Heart* it is the bestiality of the screen image that subjugates criticism.

Many viewers have felt that Lynch's brand of bestiality, like Buñuel's, is essentially indefensible because the shock effects and furious technique aren't put at the service of any obvious external "statement"—whether political, philosophical, or moral—but seem to exist merely "for their own sake." This isn't enough for those critics who, when it comes to graphic visual matter, prefer the clockwork-orange humanism of Oliver Stone or the dot-to-dot symbolics of *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, in which each gratuitous act is accompanied by a price tag announcing the value of its political correctness. When Buñuel took a razor and split an eye, did he justify the act? No, he left that to his critics, who have never succeeded in penetrating it—in subjugating its bestiality. The violent purity of the image (and of the countless personal associations experienced by its viewers over the years) has long outlived whatever political or social significance might at one time have been attached to it. If one needs to take away something in the form of instruction, I can say this: a value of Lynch's explicitness is that—like

Lost boys: Nicolas Cage (Sailor) and Dafoe (Bobby Peru)

Buñuel's eye/moon/eye gimmick—it demonstrates how safe and insensate metaphors for violence allow us to feel; they insulate us from, and therefore denigrate, the reality of violence. By alternately heightening and fantasizing that reality with such fecund imagination and fearlessness about what will or will not offend, Lynch brings us as close to it as any film-maker before him. He has, in the oft-quoted words of Pauline Kael on *Bonnie and Clyde*, put the sting back into death, and it's a sting that feels painful, scary, and exhilarating.

Admittedly, *Wild at Heart* doesn't always exceed in the right directions. It goes on too long to fully sustain the nightmare world it inhabits, the way the short films of Buñuel and Anger do, and it yawns whenever the poor materials of the story fail to inspire Lynch's eye. The scenes involving Marietta lose their novelty fast, owing to both Lynch's staging of them in the style of a lesser "Twin Peaks" installment and the tame, Ridiculous Theatre brio of Diane Ladd's acting. (Laura Dern and Nicolas Cage, though, are never less than amazing. Cage in particular seems an ideal Lynchian actor: his is the face Kyle MacLachlan tried to mask in *Blue Velvet.*) The movie takes a header in the wrap-up scenes following the botched bank job that leaves Bobby Peru dead and Sailor in jail, especially in those depicting the melting of Marietta and Sailor's epiphany of the Good Witch. These two scenes crash because they lack a visual skew—toward either the savage or the sentimental—strong enough to align them with the film's overriding spirit. But Lynch dances us out on a higher-than-high note with Sailor's Presleyesque serenade to Lula atop a car stuck in Skid Row traffic: as he croons an Elvis tune, the camera encircles the lovers in an erotic 360-degree embrace, delirious with the romance of a hard-won (and, on the film's own terms, honest) happy ending. Two hours and many miles of hell have earned these few moments of heaven.

With *Wild at Heart*, David Lynch has once again created something truly anomalous. Of course, it's always an anomaly when a movie that exalts the methods and values of the small, experimental film plays on the screens of shopping-mall cineplexes. But the film's main rewards are aesthetic, not sociological. It breaks the monopoly of cinematic narrative in two; it frees the image from the constraints of the word, frees action from deliberation and reality from comfortable metaphor. It hasn't replaced the missing controls with mere dumb, motorized movement and mayhem but with deep, horrible tableaux that roil the unconscious even as they churn the stomach. Because the film so clearly stakes itself on the supremacy of its images—rather than on the conventional narrative apparatus of most fictions—it either lives or dies according to the power of those images to shock and move, to embed themselves in some other, less accessible or explicable plane of memory. From its infernal prologue to its final, swirling reverie, *Wild at Heart* lives.

DEVIN MCKINNEY

▪ Devin McKinney lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa. This is his second appearance in *Film Quarterly*.

Making Meaning

Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema

DAVID BORDWELL

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Books

Female Spectators

Looking at Film and Television

Edited by E. Deidre Pribram. London, New York: Verso, 1988. $17.95.

This collection of nine essays reads like a grab bag of subjects and levels of discourse. It ranges from the fairly personal voices of a well-known avant-garde feminist film-maker (Michelle Citron) going mainstream and a black woman director's (Alile Sharon Larkin) diatribe against white women to three more abstract explorations of gender, film, and TV. Its self-proclaimed unifying thread is the significance of the female spectator as a maker of meaning. But what most importantly binds the volume together, and what I most value about this book, is its posture of questioning the veritable monolith of feminist film criticism dogmas.

The two most text-based analyses concern two classic Hollywood films of great importance to film feminists. Linda Williams draws valuable attention to the evolution of *Mildred Pierce* from the original screenplay written by a woman through its multiple rewritings under the shadow of *Double Indemnity*'s success. However, her repeated insistence that the two ways feminists look at films (only two?) are both essential—that our sense of the universal repression of women in cinema should not lead us to ignore the particulars of a given historic moment—belabors a self-evident point. Jeanne Allen's essay on *Rear Window* offers some useful perceptions, but her proposal that Jeffries and Lisa work things through by negotiating opens up strange vistas—Scottie of *Vertigo* in couples' therapy—along with the Ramsays?

Given some two decades of feminist film work behind us, it is fitting that these essays do considerable reassessing, even questioning, of the field's heretofore sacred unquestionables. I think particularly of the maddeningly endless, numbing incantations over a decade and a half of Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" concept. The questioning here is certainly not radical, since there is no real examination of the central values underpinning the professional conversation. What these essays do is modify, give a new complexity: perhaps add multiple factors where before only one, or at best two forces were simplistically seen as pitted in stark opposition.

Pribram's introduction sets the tone for this reexamination of feminist film truisms. As opposed to the field's continual emphasis on lack, she insists on "women's presence in, rather than absence from, the 'cinematic experience.' " She arrives at a disturbing but I think correct conclusion: "Feminist film theory has accepted certain theoretical models in order to understand an excluding and objectifying cultural positioning of women—theoretical models which themselves have sometimes helped reinforce that cultural positioning." Jackie Byars takes the critique of theoretical models further when she finds Laura Mulvey's vision faulty because embedded in a Freudian structure and when she forcefully argues that turning to Freud and Lacan was in general a grave error. The "male voice . . . that dominates our society and structures sexuality and gender also structures the very theories we use to explain them."

But the received truth questioned most strongly is the longtime rejection by feminist film scholars of mainstream narrative cinema. Pribram understands the reasons for the rejection but urges mainstream cinema's "widespread appeal and influence." Like most of the others in the volume who make this argument, her motives are purely political and have nothing to do with the art that can derive from mainstream narrative devices. Byars notes that even commercial TV dramas like "Cagney and Lacey" and "Spenser for Hire" allow the camera conventions usually applied to heterosexual love to instead convey the deep closeness between the two police women friends—or to create a nurturing male detective. Perhaps the feminist film project can then move from the margins to "the very centre of American culture."

Christine Gledhill, in one of the book's most thoughtful essays, argues that the spectator, in submitting to the pleasures of a mainstream film, does not swallow the media product whole like a TV dinner, since cultural experiences involve process: "Flux, discontinuities . . . a range of positions of identification may exist within any text." Re-

sponses to media texts are unpredictable and not easily controlled. These processes of "pleasurable negotiation," in Gledhill's view, are not confined to "high art" but apply to all cultural exchanges, with "Cagney and Lacey" and *Coma* as her examples. She further suggests that "ideologically 'pure' and full representation, whether feminist or dominant, [is] an illusory goal," and all in all, she adds welcome new notes of good sense and complexity.

Michelle Citron, in leaving avant-garde for mainstream film-making, also hopes to subvert popular forms from within, and wishes to move from the margins, especially given diminishing audiences for films like her deservedly well-known *Daughter Rite*. She cites the psychological pull toward narrative; speaks with refreshing honesty about why she turned to making avant-garde films in the first place; and looks forward to shifting from the "political correctness" of avant-garde film-making to the ambiguities, "contradictions, paradoxes," of narrative. Finally, she appeals for heterogeneity: "What we need now are narrative films made by as many women as possible in as many ways as possible about as many things as possible." Amen to that.

Teresa de Lauretis is given the last word, and a sometimes profound one. However, de Lauretis's essay, which in effect lays out strategies and goals for the entire field, draws on purist ideological assumptions many may not share, as this very volume indicates. She alone among the contributors remains unrelenting in her exclusive privileging of avant-garde films. *Jeanne Dielman* and *Born in Flames* are her embodiments of a new women's cinema, but whatever their importance, to confine a women's cinema to such films exclusively seems a terribly limiting, excessively purist, and dead-end posture.

De Lauretis writes eloquently about "what it is to look at a film as a woman," especially in terms of *Jeanne Dielman*'s impact on her, because it "constructs—formally and artfully, to be sure . . . a picture of female experience . . . which feels immediately and unquestionably true." She recognizes "in those unusual film images . . . the ways of an experience all but unrepresented, previously unseen in film." Just so, which is what can make women's films in our time such an extraordinary experience. But other narrative feature films by other women directors also provide such moving recognitions, sometimes even more powerfully. These, however, are mostly not utopian blueprints, not prescriptive, but rather they look with an unflinching eye on the totalities of our lives in all their contradictions—which is art's great gift and for which we used to celebrate it.

De Lauretis views *Jeanne Dielman* and *Born in Flames* as totally different from each other, when in fact they are not—sharing uncompromisingly anti-narrative forms, political correctness, and subversion of the pleasures of cinema so that only the most elite audience of initiates would sit through them. They bear all too strong a family resemblance to the usual short list of film and film-maker recipients of the feminist-film-studies Seal of Approval, from Sally Potter to Yvonne Rainer. Some of these are talented artists, but none can reach any sizable audience, even such a literate one as several years ago I witnessed bolt en masse in boredom from an MLA screening of *The Man Who Envied Women*. Only Citron speaks honestly about the anger and frustration of audiences feeling confused and shut out by such films. De Lauretis's argument, intriguing to read, is appallingly constricting and marginalizing as a real-life agenda for film. Surely Byars's and Gledhill's defence of popular culture dramas like "Cagney and Lacey" for feminism has even more meaning for such first-rate and far more intricately layered films as *Diary for My Children* or *Marianne and Juliane*.

The correct short list can't be prescribed as the only acceptable kind of film (classic Hollywood aside) for feminist film scholars to write about and women film-makers to make. Given the odds against women feature-film directors and the shrinking audience for foreign films, those directors need support, but instead they have been shunned by feminist film scholarship. With all the sloganeering about diversity, why is there such an airless uniformity?

Finally, one balks at the arcane language in which most of these essays are written, like the badge of a secret society. Sadly, the more original the thinking, the more forbidding the prose. Still, I suppose those of us who care deeply about women's studies, and especially women's cinema, should be thankful for any indication that the profession's lemming-like conformity is giving way.

BARBARA QUART

▪ Barbara Quart is the author of *Women Directors: The Emergence of a New Cinema* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

Mystifying Movies

Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory

By Noël Carroll. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. $15.00 paper; $37.00 cloth.

Paradigm conflicts can be difficult, sometimes painful affairs, but one measure of the vitality of an academic field may be the spirited opposition between competing theoretical models. As each is forced by the presence of other(s) to explicate, defend, and justify its claim to a more comprehensive or more rigorous structuring of the available data, the flash and fire of the debate can illuminate the field's basic and often unexamined assumptions and methods, its very history and traditions.

Something like this is now occurring in film studies. After a long period of unchallenged dominance, the reigning Althusserian-Lacanian model is under fire, on theoretical as well as methodological grounds, from a more data-driven and empirical cognitivist account. The Marxist-psychoanalytic approach invigorated a field grown torpid under the atheoretical constraints of auteurism by imposing semiotically inclined accounts of ideological interpellation and subject formation. In a rapid colonization of academic film study, it proved to have a totalizing character, a "top-down" method of reasoning, from the abstract theoretical framework to individual films or shots taken as instantiations of that framework. By contrast, emerging cognitivist perspectives look toward the research findings of other disciplines—cognitive psychology, anthropology, computer science—as a means toward a more "bottom-up" approach to theory building in which questions of visual communication and the viewer's response are acknowledged to have an empirical basis.

Noël Carroll's *Mystifying Movies* is more like an artillery barrage than an opening salvo in this battle of the paradigms. Carroll attempts to do nothing less than to demolish the dominant paradigm by subjecting it to a lengthy, detailed, and rigorously skeptical critique. Along with David Bordwell's recent *Making Meaning*, Carroll's book directs a systematic challenge not just at contemporary film theory but also at its sociological underpinnings in a field that has, in recent history, chosen, with the best of intentions, not to engage scientific methods of inquiry or to validate its theories on an empirical basis. Defining, protecting, and preserving a domain of film studies in the university system, Carroll notes, entailed that film scholars emphasize the specificity of their disciplines and its methods, and this was accompanied by a social agenda on the part of a generation of film scholars who came of age during the politicized nineteen-sixties and early seventies. By emphasizing the political relevance and role of film studies—its ability to expose and critique the work of ideology in media products—film scholars could both remain faithful to generational commitments and confirm the social role and importance of their discipline. One result of these emphases was an abiding mistrust of American empiricism (as being complicit in the work of ideology) and a corresponding preference for Continental theoretical models. Carroll's purpose here is not to question the need for a politically informed analysis of mass media but, rather, to clarify the institutional and sociological roots of contemporary film theory with the aim of explaining why film studies has chosen to address such issues as how movies remain intelligible for viewers, or how viewers process visual narratives, at a high level of theoretical speculation and abstraction while work in other disciplines—perceptual psychology, for example—can furnish answers that are tidier and more concrete and do not require an elaborate theoretical machinery to propel them.

Clarifying the historical roots and social agenda of contemporary film theory—defined here as work within or inspired by the Althusserian-Lacanian paradigm—is merely the preamble to the main task of Carroll's study. Carroll subjects the components of the Marxist-psychoanalytic model to a literal-minded test, reasoning from the stated premises to what should be their logically consequent outcomes. He takes up, in turn, Baudry's account of the apparatus and its psychological effects, Metz's analogizing of dreams, fetishes, voyeurism, and disavowal with the mechanisms of cinematic communication, the accounts of ideology and subject positioning influenced by the work of Althusser and Lacan, and the ways in which the ostensible illusions of photographic realism and perspective, narrational enunciation, and suturing are thought to position viewers in ways that make them receptive to the dominant ideology. Comple-

menting these interrogations and critiques is Carroll's second main task: to provide alternative explanations for the intelligibility of the movies and the immediacy and affective power of their address. Finally, in a concluding chapter, Carroll identifies a number of what he considers the basic methodological shortcomings and errors of contemporary Marxist-psychoanalytic film theory.

Carroll faults Baudry and Metz for constructing theories which "take the form of an inductive argument by logical analogy" (p. 14). Concerned to uncover the origin of cinema's impression-of-reality effect, for example, Baudry reasons that dreams have a similar effect and then proceeds to draw a series of analogies between dreams and the projection context, which he terms "the apparatus." A number of analogies between film and dreams are uncovered by Baudry: inhibited motoricity in the subject, lack of reality testing, darkened rooms, the medium of images, a more-than-real impression of reality. Carroll notes that the effectiveness of such an argument stands or falls on the adequacy of the correlations, and he therefore proceeds to work by way of disanalogy. He points out that the film viewer need not be immobile but can move about in ways that point to the two-dimensionality of the screen with no loss of the film's effect; that the film experience need not be solipsistic like a dream but is open to interpersonal validation (e.g., we can talk with our neighbor about what we've seen); the film viewer is experientially aware of being in a darkened room; the film image is visually articulated throughout, unlike a dream image, which is typically incomplete; and not all films seem more-than-real (home movies and bank surveillance footage seem affectless and flat).

In a similar fashion, Carroll disanalogizes the connections Metz claims to find between the cinema and imaginary identification, voyeurism, disavowal, and fetishism. Carroll admits, for example, that voyeurism can be an important issue with regard to certain specific films (e.g., *Rear Window, The Conversation*) and that there may be some film fetishists, but questions the assertion that these psychic states apply to all films, pointing out that representations are not necessarily fetish substitutes for the real, but, as symbols, belong to a distinct and different order than the real. ". . . we are interested in the representations of things in ways that we would not be interested in the things that serve as the pretexts for the representations. We are, for example, interested in still lifes of dead fish and not in the dead fish that modeled for them. Representations facilitate cognitive and emotive responses that their referents 'in nature' do not" (pp. 42–43).

More importantly, Carroll faults the seminal analyses of Baudry and Metz for seeking, as many film theorists before them had attempted, to explicate the nature of film by analogizing it to the mind. Pointing out that for an analogy to be informative we should know more about the illuminating term than the one that is to be illuminated, Carroll argues that since film is a human invention, we probably know more about it than we do about the workings of our minds. Thus, arguments that seek to analyze film through mind analogs do not have an appropriate logical structure. A second methodological problem, he suggests, lies in the attempts by Metz and Baudry to use psychoanalysis to explain not specific films but the apparatus or cinematic representation in toto. The methodological principle Carroll would insist upon here is that psychoanalysis be applied only to its acknowledged domain—study of the irrational—and, therefore, only in cases where the phenomena or behavior in question clearly involve a breakdown of rationality. "The burden of proof here is with Metz and Baudry. They must show that the cinematic medium is irrational in origin or effect before they start psychoanalyzing it" (p. 51).

With regard to the accounts of subject positioning that have emerged from the works of Althusser and Lacan, Carroll objects that they fail to show how individuals get from the momentary positioning effected by a film to more stable, lifelong ideologically instilled subject identities. In other words, like the Saussurean linguistics in which it is partly rooted, the analysis is a synchronic one, without a diachronic dimension. Furthermore, Carroll maintains, the commitment to a Saussurean-derived diacritical conception of meaning, in which meaning is disconnected from its referents and is wholly a product of the relations of difference among signs, has been coupled with a view that sees human life as entirely mediated by language. This produces mythic narratives in contemporary film theory equating language acquisition with the loss of freedom and autonomy. Such "discourse determinism" neglects what Chomsky

would call the generative function of syntactic rules or what Charles Hockett has termed the productivity of language (namely, the way in which rule-governed structure facilitates autonomy, novelty, and empowerment). Thus, just as contemporary film theory has been highly selective in the psychological models it has employed, so too has it been idiosyncratic in its views of language. Choosing Saussure and Lacan rather than Chomsky or Hockett has been a political decision. The discourse determinism of the former has provided a basis for the view of ideology as an all-powerful, all-pervasive force, an account that is basic to contemporary Marxism's explanation of why the workers in advanced capitalism have not revolted, but as an analysis of linguistic phenomena it proceeds without a firm evidentiary basis. Furthermore, analogizing linguistic models to film is risky because film lacks the syntactic rules that establish—for language—tense, a propositional structure, negatives, and so on.

Carroll rejects the thesis that the ideological operation and effects of films are found in their cinematography, narration, and classical editing, maintaining instead that they lie in the content of films, their rhetorical inflection, and the ways these intersect with a viewer's preexisting ideological commitments. The final three chapters are devoted to a refutation of the thesis, as Carroll argues that the power and immediacy of movies (i.e., commercially produced and distributed film narratives, rather than all film, much of which lacks an effectively powerful address) are rooted in (a) the transfer of real-life visual skills to pictures enabling instantaneous recognition of their depiction of familiar objects, (b) narratives that operate by posing and then answering a limited set of questions, and (c) manipulation of formal elements (camera perspectives, shot changes, compositional framing, etc.) that enable the viewer to attend to exactly those details that are significant in making sense of the narrative—". . . the cognitive clarity of movies may not only help account for their accessibility but also for the special intensity of engagement and response that movies elicit" (p. 200).

To the extent that it relies on metaphors and puns, contemporary film theory, for Carroll, exemplifies the fallacy of equivocation. Moreover, too many aspects of different films are explained by means of the same formulas, and the answers provided are too general. Data-driven, bottom-up, piece-meal theorizing is the corrective Carroll urges in his diagnostic critique, concluding that the establishment theory should be discarded and new modes of theorizing adopted. Carroll's blunt rejection of the dominant paradigm and his polemical tone will antagonize many readers, and others may question whether his account of the cognitive clarity of movies really explains their *emotional* power. But the overall critique is smart, sharp, and tightly reasoned, and it begins to chart a new direction for research and theory. Controversy over theory and method is overdue in film studies, and the developing battle of the paradigms promises renewed intellectual excitement in our field. Carroll's is an essential text in this developing debate.

STEPHEN PRINCE

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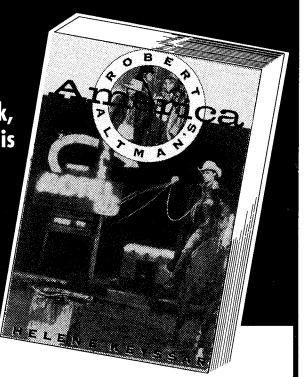

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Questions of Third Cinema

Edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen. London: British Film Institute, 1989.

Given the momentous political changes that have swept the world over the last two years (the events of May/June 1989 in Tian'anmen, the release of Nelson Mandela, the developments in eastern Europe, the ex-Soviet Union, and the Middle East, etc.), an anthology of articles questioning the concept of "third cinema" and reexamining the place of political film-making within the context of the current global situation would be welcome. Unfortunately, this poorly conceived and dated anthology does more to obfuscate than illuminate. Drawn mainly from papers presented at the Third Cinema conference held in Edinburgh in 1986, many of the articles collected here seem stale, redundant, or irrelevant to the issues at hand.

Although part of the problem may lie with the time that has elapsed between the initial conference and the book's printing, certainly the preponderance of the trouble seems to rest with the book's overall conception. No attempt is made to explain why these particular articles were selected. Hamid Naficy's rather interesting essay on America's media representation of Iran, for example, does not mention Iranian cinema at all, nor does it deal with questions of third cinema. Why the essay is printed here is anyone's guess, and why it was chosen to conclude the anthology remains a mystery, since the editors themselves make no attempt to summarize or digest any of the material included.

Pines's preface only introduces a few of the authors included; the others are not even introduced by the usual biographies in an appendix. Willemen's introductory essay does not refer directly to the authors included (with the exception of Teshome Gabriel). Rather, it puts forward a provocative new definition for "third cinema," which would divorce it somewhat from its strict association with Latin American cinema and link it with a vaguely defined political film-making globally (including US/UK independent minority filmmakers, Taiwanese and Hong Kong New Wave film-makers like Edward Yang and Allen Fong, Chinese Fifth Generation film-makers like Chen Kaige, as well as those more often associated with third cinema). Willemen's historical overview and appraisal of the original written and cinematic texts that gave rise to the third cinema phenomenon in Latin America are useful, pointing to the strengths as well as the known limitations of the concept. However, his redefinition of the term to fit changing political times and his call for a Bakhtin-inspired criticism to explicate the newly excavated Asian and Anglo-American texts he puts into this category are poorly articulated. Although the contribution by Reece Auguiste/Black Audio Film Collective later questions the inclusion of US/UK films within the category of third cinema, this issue is never really taken up seriously at all. The fact that Latin American films are not dealt with in any detail also seems odd given the fact that the term "third cinema" was coined by South Americans. Perhaps they, too, would prefer to see the term remain tied to a certain type of radical film-making practice in Latin America, Africa, and Asia?

Similarly, although (according to Pines's introduction) part of the book's *raison d'être* was to interrogate the issue of so-called "Third World essentialism," the importance and/or pitfalls of nationalism within the third cinema, and to examine the debates surrounding the use of so-called "Western theory" to explicate Third World texts, no opportunity is given for authors to engage with each other's ideas on these two crucial topics. As a result, the book seems polarized.

Teshome Gabriel, for example, dismisses most new theory as useless for any inquiry into third cinema, while Homi K. Bhabha calls for a committed theory arising from "the cultural and historical hybridity of the post-colonial world" (113). Unfortunately, both Gabriel's rather mechanistic model for third cinema theory/criticism and Bhabha's failure to demonstrate how his observations of Third World/First World discourses have any direct relationship to the cinema (i.e., he does not mention a single specific film text in his entire essay) make both positions unappealing. Given the well-known debate between Julianne Burton and Teshome Gabriel on this topic,[1] it seems odd that Burton is only mentioned in passing in Scott Cooper's essay. (Cooper goes on, in fact, to make an undeveloped but potentially fecund call for the inclusion of Stuart Hall and British cultural studies into the discussion of third cinema. Perhaps Hall should have been asked to make a contribution to

the anthology?) Because the differences between these two positions and potential commonalities are never articulated fully, the debate does not seem to go beyond positions which have already appeared in print.

The theoretical/practical issue of what third cinema films should be like also is not dealt with adequately. Clyde Taylor's call for the complete dismantling of the "aesthetic" as a category hopelessly contaminated by Eurocentric biases is never taken up for debate. Given that many of the other essays in the anthology, including both of Gabriel's contributions, expressly call for a third cinema "aesthetic," the fact that the other authors in the anthology are never given the opportunity to debate this point seems odd.

The remaining essays in the anthology vary considerably in their usefulness to an understanding of third cinema. Haile Gerima and Charles Burnett's contributions are both really manifestos calling for a renewed commitment to Afro-American film-making in the United States. Trinh T. Minh-ha and Laleen Jayamanne's essays help to explicate their film-making philosophies. Paulin Soumanou Vieyra provides a brief overview of film production in Africa. (A similar overview might have been useful for Latin America and Asia as well.)

The actual textual studies included are the highlights of this otherwise disappointing anthology. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Geeta Kapur's essays (particularly the latter's) stand out as clear, concrete analyses of Ritwik Ghatak's *Juxti Takko Ar Gappo*. Kapur's essay not only explicates the text but also places it within the context of Indian politics, performance, mythology, and narrative culture. Similarly, Manthia Diawara's essay on *Wend Kuuni* stands out as an informative discussion of the relationship of that film to the tradition of African storytelling, and how the differences in the cinematic narrative point to change within African society. Although whether or not *Wend Kuuni* can be considered a third cinema text or not could be debated, this essay still provides a much needed model for a pragmatic method that combines insights from Fanon and Gabriel with Greimas, Genette, and Propp's work on narratology.

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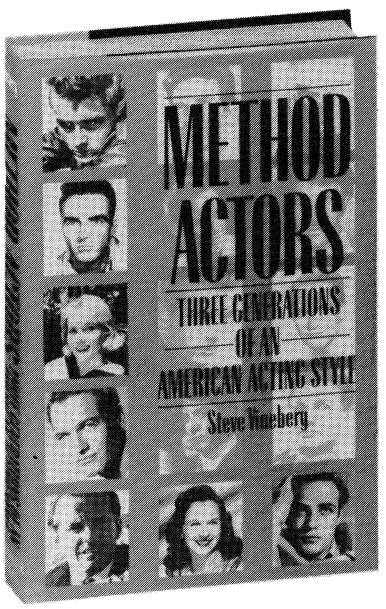

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▪ Gina Marchetti teaches at the University of Maryland, College Park.

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Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of *Psycho*

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Psycho, Hitchcock's forty-seventh film, may have been his most influential and imitated—particularly if we are to regard what has splattered our screens during the 1970s and 1980s as a kind of belated homage to the archetype. Since *Psycho* was to inspire a cinematic formula (after a decent interval), it deserves a book to itself, and finally has got itself a good, well-researched one, which happens to be a page-turner into the bargain. *Psycho*, which was shot in an almost ostentatiously short 30 days, in low-budget black-and-white as if for TV, had surprisingly small beginnings. Hitchcock: "I think the thing that appealed to me and made me decide to do the picture was the suddenness of the murder in the shower. . . . That was about all." He had promised Universal a picture; *Psycho* would get that commitment out of the way. Anthony Perkins, in Rebello's words, "owed Paramount a film under an old contract and could be hired for $40,000" —the exact amount Marion Crane pilfers in the film, and less than a tenth of what Cary Grant had just cost for *North by Northwest*.

Psycho is closer to a literary source, Robert Bloch's *noir* novel of the same name, than any other Hitchcock film I can think of; Hitchcock acknowledged that "*Psycho* all came from . . . Bloch. Joseph Stephano [the eventual screenwriter] contributed dialogue, mostly, not ideas." It was Bloch who had killed off the sympathetic heroine a third of the way through. (In the novel she is Mary Crane, but Hitchcock's assiduous researchers found a Mary Crane in the Phoenix phone book.) It was Bloch, not Hitchcock or Stephano, who had "sexed-up and Freudianized the Gothic, revitalizing such creaky elements as the rattletrap Old Dark House, the stormy night, and the crackpot madwoman locked in the dank basement"—and who had done so on the basis of real murders committed by a real-life rural psychopath, Ed Gein. What Stephano added, says Rebello, was an evident delight, one which Hitchcock shared, "in skewering America's sacred cows—virginity, cleanliness, privacy, masculinity, sex, mother-love, marriage, . . . the sanctity of the family . . . and the bathroom." (The toilet—talk about "denial"—had never been seen on the Hollywood screen before 1960.)

By the time Hitchcock had snapped up Bloch's *Psycho*, Paramount's story department had insisted it was "too repulsive" and utterly "impossible for films." To the Paramount brass, "Hitchcock and *Psycho* sounded like a bad mix" for other reasons too: Hitchcock's earlier attempts at something different (*Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Wrong Man*, *The Trouble with Harry*, *Vertigo*) had not done well at the box office. As to this one, Paramount didn't like the title or the story. In Rebello's words, they "made it clear: Paramount would not finance *Psycho* . . . they told Hitchcock [falsely] that every soundstage was booked . . ."

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Hitchcock was ready for them. He offered to finance *Psycho* himself and shoot it at Universal-International (a distinctly "B" studio) if Paramount would distribute it; he would defer his director's fee ($250,000) in exchange for 60% ownership of the negative. Paramount jumped at the offer, but it was Hitchcock who came out ahead. His check for the first-*quarter* returns was a cool $2.5 million: *Psycho* earned $15 million domestically in its first year and propelled Hitchcock into a five-picture deal with Universal. Hitchcock virtually overnight became a multimillionaire, and (so it seemed) his own boss—"the realization of a lifetime's goal."

Universal's watchdog tactics from *The Birds* onwards somewhat vitiated this coup. But the extent to which Hitchcock recognized the real value or character of his shrewdly acquired new property at the time the deal with Paramount was clinched remains unclear, even from Rebello's painstaking account. Faced as we are by the amount of ink spilled on *Psycho*'s celebrated shower-murder montage, it is chastening to learn that "cast members insist that Hitchcock regarded the murder of Arbogast on the staircase as [being] more crucial to the picture." More yet, the overwhelming, unprecedented impact of *Psycho* on movie audiences—"Faintings. Walk-outs. Repeat visits. Boycotts. Angry phone-calls and messages"—was foreseen by no one, Hitchcock included. People's responses to the film—even the cast's own, at a pre-release screening—took everyone aback. Janet Leigh: "Even when I knew what was going to come, I screamed . . . When that knife went into me on the screen, I could feel it!" Hitchcock, forever laconic: "My dear, that knife never went into you." (We learn it had a retractable blade.)

Rebello quotes William Pechter on how it felt to see *Psycho* when it was first released and became (*pace* most critics and the studio brass) an instantaneous "audience phenomenon." "The atmosphere surrounding *Psycho* was deeply charged with apprehension. Something awful is always about to happen. One could sense that the audience was constantly aware of this; indeed, it had the solidarity of a convention assembled on the common understanding of some unspoken *entente terrible*; it was, in the fullest sense, an audience, not merely a random gathering of discrete individuals. . . ."

These are words to ponder, even though, or precisely because, Rebello lets them go, doing nothing with them. They suggest that Hitchcock, through his carefully created film, and through his no less carefully orchestrated publicity blitz for it, had set about creating this audience in order deliberately and viscerally to assault it ("faire souffrir les spectateurs," as Hitchcock put it to *Cahiers du Cinéma*). As Carol Clover has already pointed out (*Representations*, Fall 1987) and is about to expand upon in her forthcoming *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, a survey of the slasher films *Psycho* was eventually to inspire, the audience's collective body "recoils, shudders, cries out" in very much the same way as Marion Crane's had in the film, or Janet Leigh's at its preview. Rebello observes that "no one could have predicted how powerfully *Psycho* tapped into the American subconscious. . . . Never before had any director so worked the emotions of the audience." This offhand observation awaits what it is not in Rebello's restricted brief to provide: explanation.

PAUL THOMAS

▪ Paul Thomas teaches political science at the University of California, Berkeley.

Realism and Tinsel

Cinema and Society in Britain 1939-48

By Robert Murphy. New York: Routledge, 1989. $15.95.

Is English film history worth taking seriously? Or as Truffaut put it, "Isn't there a certain incomparability between the terms *cinema* and *Britain*?" This attitude may have changed after the late fifties kitchen-sink period, the sixties American financial invasion of Wardour Street and the Eberts-Puttnam-Goldcrest triumphs of the early eighties, but regarding anything earlier the gospel (at least in the U.S.A.) tends to be "an English cinema of lasting value . . . who are you kidding?" So Robert Murphy's excellent *Realism and Tinsel* comes as a timely corrective. It serves as a necessary reappraisal of a largely neglected body

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of film-making and creates a context for a much more informed analysis of popular British cinema.

There are strong arguments for considering the years 1939–48 to be the golden age of the British film industry. Certainly it was a very prolific one. However, for dominant critics of the time such as C.A. Lejeune and Dilys Powell, the reputation of a golden age rests on their regard for a very small group of films, such as *In Which We Serve, Brief Encounter, Fires Were Started, The Third Man,* and a few Ealing comedies. The defining characteristics of these films seem to be a concentration on authentically British subjects and a realistic approach that owed a debt to the British documentary movement of the thirties. The problem is that this critical orthodoxy, which smacks of a certain elitism, totally ignores the mainstream cinema of the time. What appealed to the majority was a full-blooded cinema with themes ranging from passion to romance to murder and psychological disturbance. And many of these films were not just popular but, in cases like *The Man in Grey, A Matter of Life and Death,* and *The Seventh Veil,* just as good and interesting in their own way as anything in the realist school. And Murphy makes us see this very clearly.

Murphy brings to our attention five areas of film which he thinks have been neglected by critical orthodoxy—costume pictures like *The Wicked Lady*, contemporary melodramas, British gangster films, morbid thrillers, and comedies and musicals like *Champagne Charlie*. (Few of the films in this grouping made it to North America; leaving aside questions of market capacity, most were considered too parochial, too class-conscious, too narrowly British, too sexless, too quaint, or in the final analysis just too dull for American tastes.) Murphy's main achievement, however, is that he places and discusses the films within the social and political context of the times. This seems an obvious way to look at films, and yet today films are too often viewed as just too many texts without background. Thus the chapter on the "spiv" film becomes doubly interesting because of Murphy's short description of the way crime and the black market operated in the blitz.

Realism and Tinsel also provides a very good analysis of the problems and possibilities confronting the British producers and studios of the forties, and a fascinating study of the relationship between documentaries and features. So one hesitates to ask for more—especially of a book that is so well researched and clearly written and that does such a fine job of retrieving buried treasures. But it is just because we are so stimulated that we want to know more about neglected directors such as Brian Desmond Hurst, Leslie Arliss, and Marcel Varnel, about the contributions of producers like Ted Black and Filipo del Giudice, about the work of art directors like Alex Vetchinsky and Oliver Messel and cameramen like Jack Cardiff and Guy Green. Maybe this will happen on the next archaeological dig, because a rich ground still awaits the explorer.

ALAN ROSENTHAL

▪ Alan Rosenthal is an author and filmmaker who teaches at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Resisting Images
Essays on Cinema and History

Edited by Robert Sklar and Charles Musser. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990. $44.95.

The blossoming of film studies as a distinct academic discipline over the past two decades was marked by an estrangement from history. Not only did theory and criticism, rather than historical scholarship, dominate the emerging field, but as Musser and Sklar explain, that theoretical work often rejected history altogether: "The dominant structuralist and poststructuralist tendencies within cinema scholarship frequently adopted an adamant anti-historical stance, regarding historiography as tainted by 'empiricism' and their own subject matter as operating somehow outside temporality" (p. 3). As a result, historical studies of the development of the film industry lagged and cinema scholarship was rarely grounded in an understanding of time and place. For their part, professional historians paid little attention to the developing discipline. Put off by theorizing and overwhelmed by the elaboration of a new specialized discourse, historians largely remained ignorant of cinema studies and

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continue to incorporate films into their histories only in the most superficial and uncritical ways, if at all.

Fortunately, both fields are coming to recognize the impoverishment caused by this gulf. Cinema scholars, like literary critics, are increasingly looking to ground their discourse analysis in history. Meanwhile, historians, painfully aware of the limitations of plot summaries, are beginning to explore more critical readings of films. While bridging the chasm of approach, methodology, and language remains a daunting task, the 12 essays collected by Sklar and Musser illustrate the potential of connecting these disciplines.

The individual essays in *Resisting Images* are both chronologically and geographically diverse, ranging from the early years of cinema until the present and from the United States to Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and South America. Such diversity means that few specialists will be interested in more than one or two essays. The chief value of the collection therefore lies in the broader approach which links the essays together. This approach involves not just the historicization of film studies, but more specifically, a historical focus on cinematic resistance.

"The term *resistance* marks a significant choice," Sklar and Musser argue. "It has until recently played little role in the discourse of film historiography. Politically committed film scholarship, working from a variety of perspectives ranging from the Frankfurt School to Althusserian Marxism, had overwhelmingly emphasized, in cinema as in society as a whole, the heavy hand of domination. These approaches almost precluded a space for oppositional practices. Resistance, in contrast, connotes opposition—it implies exertion, force, effort" (5). Focusing on resistance thus links film studies to the new histories of the last three decades which have sought to reconstruct a past in which ordinary people played an active role in their own history.

Sklar's own provocative opening essay, "Oh! Althusser!: Historiography and the Rise of Cinema Studies," clearly establishes the breadth of issues at stake through an exploration of the historiography on the early cinema. The debate over the early cinema in many ways encapsulates historical controversy over film as it focuses on the interaction of audience and film, i.e., "what cultural transactions occurred in that audience, whether it constituted an autonomous working-class public sphere or was the site for the absorption of hegemonic domination. . . ." The questions raised involve the relationship between "modes of cultural production and reception" (20). Sklar's own earlier book, *Movie-Made America*, which identified movies as "a site of struggle over cultural power," emphasized the autonomy and agency of working-class audiences. Now, taking stock of revisionist criticism and further research, he recognizes that resistance is one side of a larger dialectic that must take into account middle-class cultural power.

Sklar uses his account of the early cinema to illustrate the value of interaction between history and film studies. Social history has awakened film studies to the social experience of audiences and therefore restored "working-class experiences and class conflict to the discourse on early cinema." At the same time, however, social history has much to learn from film studies for cinema "*is* different from the saloon and the dance hall and other cultural sites valorized in radical social history of popular culture. Whatever cinema was as this type of social experience, it was also a mass communications medium with aesthetic, ideological, and psychological dimensions. Its social contestation ultimately arose in relation to film spectatorship as a *mental* experience" (31). To understand the film experience, therefore, the theories and close readings of cinema studies are of invaluable use to the historian.

The collected essays in *Resisting Images* each focus on different aspects of cinematic resistance. Some are largely exploratory and seek to uncover the lost history of oppositional film-making. Steven J. Ross illustrates the vast ideological diversity of early noncommercial film-making in the United States. Looking at long-forgotten industrial, labor, and government films, he demonstrates the extent to which class conflict was played out both on the screen and in the production of films about labor. Likewise, Jonathan Buchsbaum uncovers leftist film-making in Europe between the wars, and two essays, by Robert Stam and Ismail Xavier and by Ana Lopez, sketch out the dimensions of oppositional film-making in Latin America. In a similar vein, Kyoko Hirano's account of the production and suppression of *The Japanese Tragedy* is a tight case study of a political contest over film content.

Clearly demonstrating the changing policy of American occupation forces in Japan, her essay is an example of how cinema history provides a valuable source for diplomatic historians.

Other essays go further and offer alternative oppositional readings of familiar texts. Establishing the historical, social, and cultural context of filmmaking is a central aspect of this process. Charles Musser, for example, takes aim at universalist interpretations of Charlie Chaplin's comedies. Situating Chaplin's work within the culture of early twentieth-century industrialism, Musser explores the myriad ways in which Chaplin's comedy was closely linked to the social experiences of his working-class audience. In so doing, he restores the political content of these films. Likewise, Vance Kepley, Jr., offers an alternative reading of early Soviet films through an examination of the viewing experience in Soviet Worker Clubs of the 1920s. An understanding of history as used in films can also open new perspectives. In a provocative reinterpretation of *Senso*, Leger Grindon makes it clear that the film is much more than just spectacle and melodrama because it is set in the disputed terrain of Risorgimento history. Locating the melodrama against this historical backdrop imbued it with powerful political implications in postwar Italy.

The richest essays in *Resisting Images* illustrate the values of historical readings when they are combined with the techniques of cinema studies to explore a multitude of factors including plot, characterization, and point-of-view as well as the social context of viewership. Ella Shohat's "Master Narrative/Counter Readings: The Politics of the Israeli Cinema," provides a powerful indictment of the ideological limitations of Israeli films by focusing on narrative structure, "focalization," and what is left out. Equally provocative, Antonia Lant's "The Female Spy: Gender, Nationality, and War in *I See a Dark Stranger*," employs a feminist theory, insightful plot analysis, attention to film structure and device, as well as a clear understanding of the unique historical moment at the end of the Second World War in which the film was produced to develop a rich and multilayered reading of the film and postwar British culture.

At their best, the essays in *Resisting Images* provide fresh insights into fundamental cultural questions by pairing historical and critical analysis, although some unevenness among the disparate essays makes all too apparent the difficulty in employing the techniques of two disciplines in a unified analysis. Nonetheless, the emergence of a dialogue among historians and cinema scholars over the meaning of cultural production, representation, and reception holds great promise for those seeking to understand twentieth-century mass culture.

MARK LAWRENCE KORNBLUH

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French Film: Texts and Contexts

Edited by Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. $16.95.

Can one escape from construing French cinema, and European "art" cinema generally, as simply Hollywood's "other," and at the same time remain attentive to the cultural specificity of particular films? Can one recognize the centrality, in the French context, of *cinéma d'auteur* as a mode of production and a mode of film practice without necessarily adopting an auteurist critical stance?

Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau are inclined to answer these questions affirmatively. Support for their position can be found in this volume's 21 essays commissioned from 17 scholars working in France, Great Britain, and the United States. With few exceptions, each essay focuses on a single work that has become part of what is generally taken to be the French film "canon." Although the articles are arranged chronologically by release date—moving from studies of films by Dulac and Gance through Pagnol, Bresson, and Tati to Rohmer, Pialat, and Varda—the editors, who envision a second volume, make no claim to offer a representative portrait or history of French cinema. Moreover, they acknowledge in their introduction that early cinema, mainstream popular movies, and films from the 1970s are especially underrepresented.

Clearly demonstrating the changing policy of American occupation forces in Japan, her essay is an example of how cinema history provides a valuable source for diplomatic historians.

Other essays go further and offer alternative oppositional readings of familiar texts. Establishing the historical, social, and cultural context of filmmaking is a central aspect of this process. Charles Musser, for example, takes aim at universalist interpretations of Charlie Chaplin's comedies. Situating Chaplin's work within the culture of early twentieth-century industrialism, Musser explores the myriad ways in which Chaplin's comedy was closely linked to the social experiences of his working-class audience. In so doing, he restores the political content of these films. Likewise, Vance Kepley, Jr., offers an alternative reading of early Soviet films through an examination of the viewing experience in Soviet Worker Clubs of the 1920s. An understanding of history as used in films can also open new perspectives. In a provocative reinterpretation of *Senso*, Leger Grindon makes it clear that the film is much more than just spectacle and melodrama because it is set in the disputed terrain of Risorgimento history. Locating the melodrama against this historical backdrop imbued it with powerful political implications in postwar Italy.

The richest essays in *Resisting Images* illustrate the values of historical readings when they are combined with the techniques of cinema studies to explore a multitude of factors including plot, characterization, and point-of-view as well as the social context of viewership. Ella Shohat's "Master Narrative/Counter Readings: The Politics of the Israeli Cinema," provides a powerful indictment of the ideological limitations of Israeli films by focusing on narrative structure, "focalization," and what is left out. Equally provocative, Antonia Lant's "The Female Spy: Gender, Nationality, and War in *I See a Dark Stranger*," employs a feminist theory, insightful plot analysis, attention to film structure and device, as well as a clear understanding of the unique historical moment at the end of the Second World War in which the film was produced to develop a rich and multilayered reading of the film and postwar British culture.

At their best, the essays in *Resisting Images* provide fresh insights into fundamental cultural questions by pairing historical and critical analysis, although some unevenness among the disparate essays makes all too apparent the difficulty in employing the techniques of two disciplines in a unified analysis. Nonetheless, the emergence of a dialogue among historians and cinema scholars over the meaning of cultural production, representation, and reception holds great promise for those seeking to understand twentieth-century mass culture.

MARK LAWRENCE KORNBLUH

▪ Mark Lawrence Kornbluh teaches at Washington University in St. Louis.

French Film: Texts and Contexts

Edited by Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. $16.95.

Can one escape from construing French cinema, and European "art" cinema generally, as simply Hollywood's "other," and at the same time remain attentive to the cultural specificity of particular films? Can one recognize the centrality, in the French context, of *cinéma d'auteur* as a mode of production and a mode of film practice without necessarily adopting an auteurist critical stance?

Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau are inclined to answer these questions affirmatively. Support for their position can be found in this volume's 21 essays commissioned from 17 scholars working in France, Great Britain, and the United States. With few exceptions, each essay focuses on a single work that has become part of what is generally taken to be the French film "canon." Although the articles are arranged chronologically by release date—moving from studies of films by Dulac and Gance through Pagnol, Bresson, and Tati to Rohmer, Pialat, and Varda—the editors, who envision a second volume, make no claim to offer a representative portrait or history of French cinema. Moreover, they acknowledge in their introduction that early cinema, mainstream popular movies, and films from the 1970s are especially underrepresented.

To avoid perpetuating grand historical narratives à la Georges Sadoul, Hayward and Vincendeau asked contributors to subject individual works to nuanced intertextual scrutiny. Taking their lead from Roland Barthes, the editors conceived their project as an investigation into how films can be seen as "tissues of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (3). The volume's essays suggest that fields of particular intertextual pertinence are industry and financing practices, the discourses of social and political histories, generic expectations of contemporary audiences, the presence or absence of stars, technological and aesthetic movements, and the so-called canon itself.

To the credit of the editors and the essayists, *French Film: Texts and Contexts* provides a window onto some of the issues which many contemporary film scholars seem most concerned with. Foremost among these, it would appear from this volume, is the relation of film to human desire as construed from psychoanalytic perspectives.

In her treatment of Germaine Dulac's sustained exploration of psychic process, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis makes a strong case for the "nexus of psychoanalysis and the cinema, sexuality and representation" as crucial to feminist thinking; she also takes as axiomatic that "the question of feminine desire is the question of desire itself" (20). Vincendeau profitably views Marcel Pagnol's Marseilles trilogy as "a long declension on the name and nature of the father" (77), but one that allows for a surprising variety of normally irreconcilable spectator positions, notably the deployment of maternal and filial desires. Via a psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading of Marcel Carné's *Le Jour se lève*, Maureen Turim conceptualizes the film's central character as "the troubled aspect of a subject whose desires are potentially magnified as outside of control or compromise," enabling her to interpret the protagonist's suicide not as symptomatic of France's prewar defeatism but as "a refusal of suffering and the danger of being further misunderstood or manipulated" (104).

Utilizing tools of Lacanian analysis, Susan Hayward puts forth the thesis that Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* is "largely a homo-erotic 'text' " which attempts to disclose a "different, non-phallic perception of human relations" (128). Although space limitations prevent Hayward from making her arguments in a thoroughly convincing manner, her statements on the homophobic strains embedded in the reviews that first greeted the film constitute a noteworthy contribution to gay and lesbian film studies. Inspired mainly by D. W. Winnicott, Anne Gillain's elegant psychoanalytic study of *Les 400 coups* disengages the primal Truffaut fantasy of "desire for fusion with a maternal figure" (194). And drawing on Mulvey, Metz, Kristeva, and Chasseguet-Smiregel, Claire Pajaczkowska provides a probing, lucid discussion of Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, in which she distinguishes among the film's fetishized women, its absent mothers, and its phallic mother fantasy as embodied in the businessman-technocrat. Possibly the most original of the collection's psychoanalytically oriented pieces is Bérénice Reynaud's study of how spatial arrangements in Eric Rohmer's *Les Nuits de la pleine lune* support that film's structures of desire.

It may only be by chance—although it is more likely a result of Flitterman-Lewis's axiom referred to above—that the writers in this collection who most emphatically address issues concerning desire are women. At least partially at stake, one surmises, is a political agenda that seeks to uncover, reclaim, and empower female voices and visions in academia as well as in cinema.

The scholars who explicitly address matters of politics and ideology in this volume are more equally divided between women and men. In an essay on *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance*, Norman King scans the film's traces of books on the emperor's life by Léon Bloy and Elie Faure in order to debunk commonly held notions that the film was a misunderstood masterpiece ahead of its time and that it is essentially proto-fascist. In a second provocative piece King offers a subtle analysis of irony in Rohmer's *Ma Nuit chez Maud*, demonstrating how the film, by "evacuat[ing] in one blow the politically controversial and blatantly commercial" (232), occupies a reactionary position vis-à-vis the abortive revolution of May 1968. Michèle Lagny, in a rich but somewhat disjointed study of spectator positioning in *La Bête humaine*, courageously raises the issue of Renoir's political "hypocrisy" (86). And Jean-Pierre Jeancolas's engaging but desultory remarks on *Les Enfants du paradis* contain the forceful proposition that the constraints of the Oc-

cupation showed that Carné and Prévert were "better equipped than others to transpose their work into a temporal 'elsewhere'" (118).

Arguably the most challenging essay in the collection is Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier's unremittingly abstract study of *Hiroshima mon amour*. Through the intertextual prism of Marguerite Duras's *La Douleur*, a diary written in 1945 and published in 1985, Ropars-Wuilleumier characterizes the film's *écriture* as fulfilling a "double task of signification and obliteration" (182), by which the Hiroshima holocaust eludes both words and figuration. Equally masterful and far less pretentious is Richard Abel's "radical re-reading" (37) of Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Argent*. Analyzing the relationship between style and ideology in a film that tells a story of capitalist exploitation, Abel sees this late 1920s text as "modernist" insofar as "the materials of the film medium and their deployment as a disruptive system become an ancillary subject of the film" (45), thereby serving to critique not only the genre of historical reconstruction but the crisis in capitalist society on the brink of the Great Depression.

Only two of the contributors take narrative form and technique as their central concern: Michel Marie vividly treats René Clair's experiments with sound in *Sous les toits de Paris*; and Pierre Sorlin analyzes the impact on spectator enjoyment of the apparent lack of narrative coordination in Jacques Tati's *Les Vacances de M. Hulot*. Issues of periodization and aesthetic movements garner relatively scant attention here, but the writers who do attend to them make useful contributions. Jacques Aumont positions Godard's *Le Mépris* within the context of the *nouveau roman*; Vincendeau insightfully situates Maurice Pialat's *A nos amours* within traditions of French realisms; and Hayward usefully appeals to painterly traditions extending from Piero della Francesca and Botticelli through Van Gogh to support her thesis of a "de-fetishization of the text as well as the body-female" (294) in Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi*. However, it is in Dudley Andrew's unabashedly affectionate reading of Jacques Becker's *Casque d'or* that one finds the volume's most ambitious treatment of such issues. Addressing the "problem" of 1950s French cinema in the light of its seeming secondariness vis-à-vis prewar Poetic Realism, Andrew nicely construes Becker's "earned nostalgia" (158) as "a rebuke to a present that has failed to live up to the image he casts of the past" (166).

The pedagogic value of *French Film: Texts and Contexts* is as considerable as its scholarly worth. Each essay is followed by a "selected bibliography" of French- and English-language critical texts on the film and its director plus a filmography of the director's works. At the end of the volume there is a more general eight-page bibliography of titles on the French cinema. The book contains a few weak translations and occasional punctuation errors; the faulty sentence structure that persists throughout Claire Pajaczkowska's essay apparently received no editorial attention. Nonetheless, Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau have furnished us with a rich and useful collection of first-rate writing on masterworks of the French cinema. Deliberately limiting the volume's scope to so-called canonical films—in part because of the accessibility of such titles in 16mm and video formats—the editors and their collaborators demonstrate that the canon continues to offer intellectual challenges of a high order. EDWARD BARON TURK

▪ Edward Baron Turk, author of *Child of Paradise* (on Marcel Carné), teaches at MIT.

A Cinema of Nonfiction

By William Guynn. Cranbury, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 1990. $38.50.

Using Christian Metz's classification of the Large Syntagmatic Category of the Image Track, Guynn asks what changes when these sequences occur in classic documentaries rather than classic fiction. The study relies on close analysis of eleven films from *Nanook of the North* (1922) to *Les Maîtres fous* (1955) and includes several very astute shot-by-shot analyses of specific sequences. After surveying documentary film theory up to Bazin and classic ethnography, Guynn demonstrates that the meaning and function of Metz's syntagmatic category shifts markedly as narrative patterns of organization, particularly the self-effacement of the narrating agency, yield to

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discursive ones, particularly the dominance of spoken commentary as an organizing agency.

These shifts risk undermining Guynn's starting point: if the eight types of sequence cannot be identified as readily, if some types blur into others, and if organizational power shifts to the sound track, why give priority to this one, partial, and somewhat limiting code of cinematic narrative? Guynn does not respond by jettisoning the concepts or vocabulary of Metzian semiotics. Instead he works through, with considerable subtlety and precision, how the textual system of specific documentaries displaces, deforms, or deposes this code to establish distinct challenges and pleasures for the viewer. The weaving of discursive commentary and fictional evocation establishes an ambiguous relationship between classic documentary and classic fiction. It also forces the viewer to compete with the voice-of-God commentator for the power, and pleasure, of organizing the visible text into an intelligible story or statement. Suggestive and insightful in its details, *A Cinema of Nonfiction* has a very restricted focus. The rigor, clarity, and, at times, eloquence of its argument compensate for its disengagement from other forms of documentary and other approaches to narrative construction in nonfiction. BILL NICHOLS

▪ Bill Nichols is a visiting professor of Theatre Arts at the University of California at Santa Cruz. His most recent book is *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary.*

The Columbia Checklist

The Feature Films, Serials, Cartoons and Short Subjects of Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1922-1988

By Leo D. Martin. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991. $65.00.

Beginning with a very brief preface and a too-brief historical overview, the author is quite meticulous in his careful listing of complete credits for each feature film, serial, and animated subject, including a section on miscellaneous and independent short subjects. Comedy shorts are relegated to a title listing in one of the four appendices (the author noting that this area is completely covered in the same publisher's 1986 title *The Columbia Comedy Shorts*). The other appendices include a title listing of the movie series (from "Blondie" to "The Whistler"), Western movies, stars (including co-starring appearances), and Columbia Academy Awards (listing every Columbia picture nominated in *any* category, with winners in bold print). While there are no illustrations, the author does add footnotes where appropriate (e.g., noting *The Harder They Fall* as Humphrey Bogart's last film), making the reference noteworthy as not relying strictly on credits and statistical information. The author also includes the independent and foreign productions Columbia began distributing during the late sixties. JAMES L. NEIBAUR

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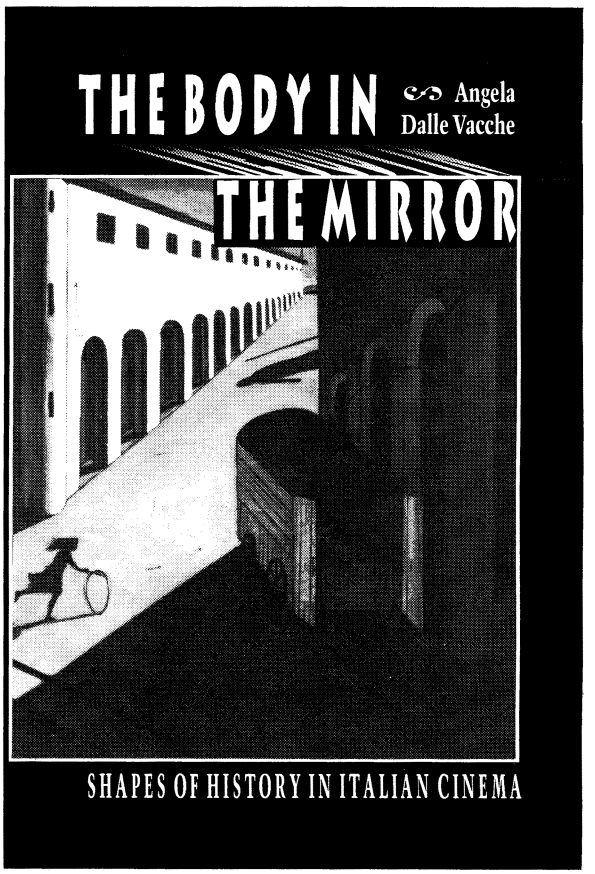

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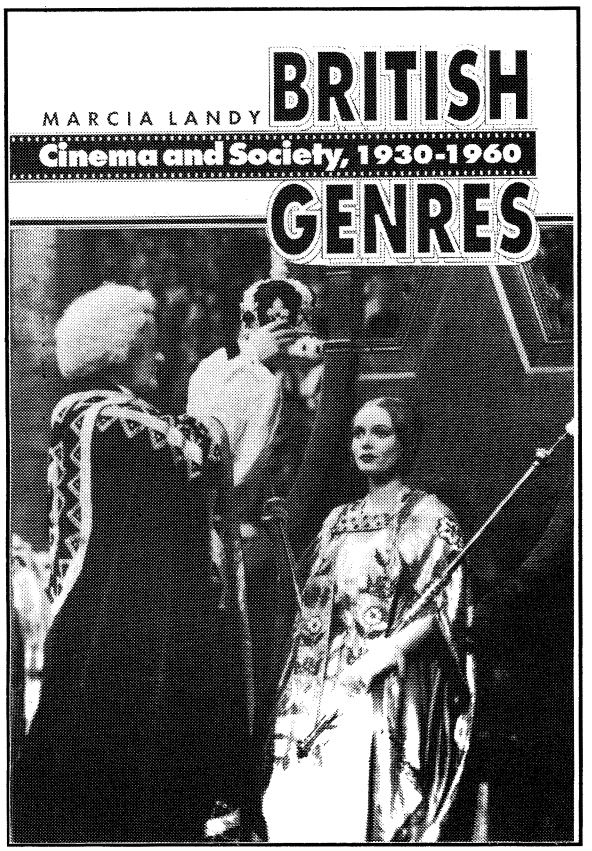

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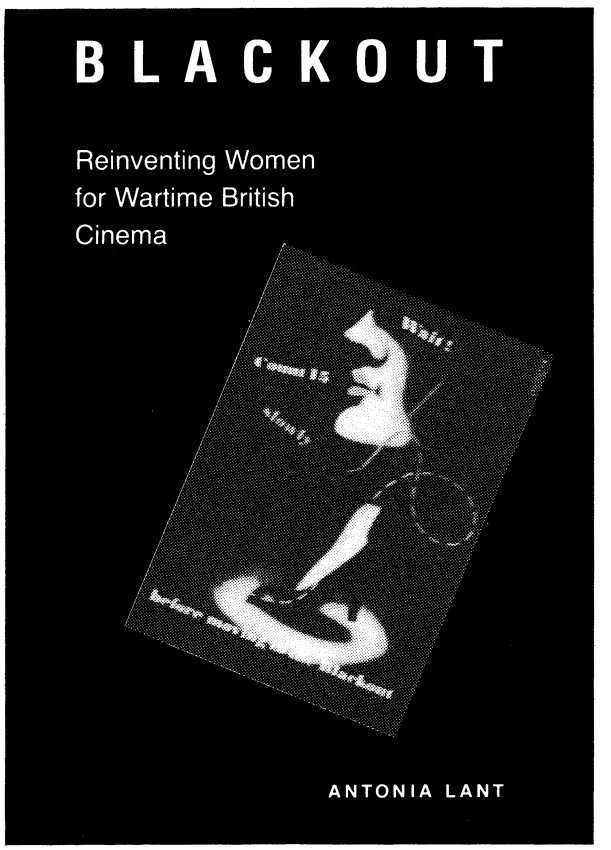

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DIRECTORAS DE LARGO-METRAJES DE FICCIÓN

Luis Trelles Plazaola

Este libro fascinante es el primer estudio dedicado al tema. Explora en su primera parte la presencia de las mujeres como directoras de largo-metrajes de ficción en América Latina desde el período silente hasta la época sonora, para concluir con las más recientes aportaciones. En su segunda parte incluye once entrevistas a destacadas realizadoras. El conjunto de entrevistas comprende desde la pionera mexicana Matilde Landeta hasta directoras que inician hoy exitosamente sus carreras, como la mexicana Busi Cortés, y la venezolana Matilde Vera, pasando por las importantísimas María Luisa Bemberg y Tizuka Yamazaki. El volumen contiene decenas de fotografías de las directoras y escenas de sus filmes.

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